

Frederick Sommer

Luiz Carlos Felizardo

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by

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Introduction

This work was made possible by a Fellowship in the Arts from the VITAE Foundation, Brazil, in February 1990. It has taken a few years to complete my work. I would like to thank VITAE for having supported me so generously during that time.

It should be mentioned here, that I had support from the Fulbright Commission in the form of a PANAM/FULBRIGHT Travel Grant, awarded when another trip to Prescott, Arizona, proved to be needed. This trip provided me the opportunity to revise with Frederick Sommer much of my research.

I am deeply indebted to all people that in one way or another collaborated with my project, offering their hospitality, providing valuable information, and sharing with me their time and experience:

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Above all, I should thank Frances and Fred Sommer, which is not easy at all: I owe to them much more than I can possibly tell here. But I need to say that they were affectionately receptive to my presence and to my questions, transforming each simple talk into an experience full of excitement. In many ways, Fred proved his own conviction that “all rare things should be lent away,” in giving me, warmly, most of his precious time.

Luiz Carlos Felizardo

May, 1996

Itinerary to a Discovery

In 1984, I received a scholarship from the Fulbright Commission in a program for Specialization in the Arts. The program was new, no more than one year, and, judging by the characteristics of Fulbright grants, there was a strong tendency to locate the grantees in American universities. Perhaps that experience of the American university would have been of some value too, but, in the end, I was saved from the academic bureaucracy by Louis Finkelstein, then a Professor of Art at the Queens College, New York. It was he, in our interview in São Paulo, who first talk about the possibility of making something special out of my grant: to work with someone, someone able, as he said, to “widen my horizons.”

Contacts were made in the US that produced four names: Frederick Sommer, Paul Caponigro, Emmet Gowin and Frank Gohlke. I was interested in Caponigro's work and, of course, in Emmet's. Frederick Sommer . . . well, Fred Sommer was one of the greats of the History of Photography; for me, he was up there with Stieglitz or Weston—a little bit less, perhaps, because both were dead. But, being at the top of the list, it was Sommer who first received a letter from Finkelstein and my portfolio. Surprisingly enough, he accepted the idea of having a Fulbright grantee working under his supervision. After some negotiations between him and the Fulbright Commission my grant was confirmed: “Mr. Frederick Sommer, Academic Adviser. It is understood that you will hold an internship with Mr. Sommer, collaborating with him in various photographic techniques. . . .”

Considering that I was leaving Brazil to stay one year with Frederick Sommer, my information about him was very poor. I knew the reputation of his work, I knew he was considered one of the greatest printmakers of the whole world and that a large group of his prints, texts and memorabilia—together with the works of Ansel Adams, Wynn Bullock, Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind—was chosen by the Center for Creative Photography at Tucson to begin its major collection. I had seen, once, the catalog *Venus, Jupiter and Mars*. I was impressed by the quality of his unusual images, but I couldn't remember the text. I'd never seen other books on him and I thought he was American. I was aware he lived in Arizona, which I confess, frightened me a little, but I had no information on his private life: his age, if he was married or not, if there were children, who were the people that worked with him. Fred wrote me three or four letters; he sound very friendly, but extremely laconic. The last letter told about Prescott's climate and the best options for clothes to take, “Dress is very informal, although you may want to bring a suit.” At the end, he said that “All of us here look forward to your coming.” I couldn't imagine who all these people were, and even less that the man who was waiting for me in Prescott was almost a Brazilian.

I got to the US in July, 1984, and went to the University of California, Davis, to have six weeks of English for Foreign Students. It was through the amazement shown by Harvey Himelfarb, photographer, Head of the Art Department, when he found out that I was there to work with Fred, that I began to understand that this Mr. Sommer was someone much more special than I could have suspected he was. Harvey suggested I go to the library and look-up Fred's writings. He said, "You better get acquainted with Fred Sommer's ideas." And this advice sounded like an invitation to be cautious.

Anyway, I followed his advice. The writings revealed, through an interesting text of high quality, a writer of solid culture with far range of interests, and a very creative mind. It was possible to feel, behind the letters, a healthy percentage of humor, perhaps even a touch of irony. I found that "Fred Sommer's ideas" weren't so disturbing for me, even having never read anything similar from another artist. My expectations grew: the man was far more interesting than I could have anticipated.

The visit to the library provided some further information: Fred Sommer was born in Italy, in 1905, with the name of Fritz, on September 7, the same date of the Brazilian Independence Day. One month more and he would be 79. He was married, apparently without children; one of the books showed a portrait of the couple. But the great shock was to come from an information concerning 1913: "Moves with family to São Paulo, Brazil." And not only had he moved to Brazil, but he lived there until 1930, from the age of 7 to 25: time enough to shape any personality.

I'm not sure it's easy to imagine the feelings I had, but they were quite peculiar. It sounds like a kind of treason that going there to live and work for a year with that man and only then to find out that there was between us something like a common past. And to know that someone of his importance in American art had grown up in my own country and lived there for such an important a period in his life, was exciting.

In the next phone call, we had already talked by phone, I said nothing about my discoveries, because I did not know what to say; we only scheduled my trip to Prescott. My curiosity, however, was heightened: “Someone of my family will pick you up in the airport.” I called again on September 7, his birthday; it was unavoidable, then, to say something about Brazil, and I asked about his Portuguese. The answer was a good laugh and the brief comment, in English: “So, you’ve been doing some research on my past.” It was all he said.

Months later, better acquainted with Fred’s particular style, I began to understand that, if I haven’t found about his Brazilian past, Fred would have cooked me up for the longest time possible, for the pleasure of making a joke.

I flew to Phoenix the next day. The family representative in the airport was Nicki Hill, a painter—far from being a member of the family. Traveling up to Prescott, some of my inquiries were answered: no, Fred doesn’t have anything close to a workshop, he works alone, and I was the first visitor of “that kind” there. The people around him were Frances, his wife; Richard Landis, an old friend and an artist himself, with whom I was going to stay the next eleven months; and Nicki herself, a kind of general secretary and companion to the couple. As you see, it was a very small community.

We got there in the evening, at Fred’s small wooden house in the outskirts of Prescott. Literally among the woods, the house is surrounded by a big and fragrant national forest of ponderosa pines that extends for many miles around the small town.

We were both curious to know each other; he, too, had more or less bet in the dark, much more than I did. But the fact is that things went well from our first meeting; the talk was easy and I felt comfortable. I liked the food, I liked the extreme simplicity of their home, the walls covered by books, the smell of the place. I liked them: frank, good-humored—substantial. But we didn’t talk about Brazil.

Slowly, Fred's Brazilian past became part of our daily life. In the kitchen, its presence was clear: a fair amount of rice and beans, black beans, coming from Mexico. Fred is an excellent cook, and he cooked everyday. Sometimes he was replaced by Dick Landis: this chef of simplicity was able to put a trout with some herbs in boiling water and make of it something unforgettable. Fred's Italian side showed up in the form of huge cans of Bertolli, the olive oil he used in everything, and Italian pasta, even his admixture of pasta and chili sauce. At times, Dick used to bring some game and there were wonderful asparagus and high quality liver sausage and the flavor of many, many Mexican peppers—always with the help of good wine or the best beer. For me, after six weeks of torture in a University dining hall, where only the ice-cream was good, it was like leaving McDonald's and entering Trois Gros. And the ice cream was even better.

Later on I began to understand how significant the kitchen was in Fred's life: his way of cooking, of mixing the many ingredients, is, as his work, a coherent expression of his ideas.

After dinner, hands behind his head, Fred used to seat in a day bed surrounded by books, next to the dining table. From there, he asked me many questions about Brazil, about Rio de Janeiro, testing memories of streets and squares, of museums and libraries—and telling about his time in my country. We found out that the country we had in common was different for each of us: I never knew the Rio de Janeiro he had left more than fifty years ago, and the information he had about modern Brazil was scant, uncertain, and without local color. His memories came in waves; and when they came, frequently his information did not agree with mine.

He talked of a hill at the side of Copacabana Palace Hotel ("The Hill of Heaven") that I would never have imagined; he asked about some place in the Quitanda Street ("the best 'pasties' in Rio de Janeiro") only to regret the evidence that quite unlikely it would be still there. But some important characteristics were still the same: the long talks in the street cafes, the Brahma beer and the "Guaraná," the "rascality," the consented

sensuality. At least until my own generation, the influence of the European culture, French in special, was stronger; the same happened with a certain telling of, to be frank, “superiority” over our American brothers from the North: less rigidity, more malleability, more “savoir vivre,” more humor. Yet all that is not the whole truth.

Therefore, I understood perfectly when Harold Jones told me in a letter that Fred was “almost aristocratic” in his memories of Brazil

In the shelves full of books, present in every room of the house, I found some traces of the Brazilian grown Fred Sommer: Camões’ *Os Lusíadas* and sonnets, Machado de Assis, a book by Blake in Portuguese, Fernando Pessoa, a bilingual edition of Brazilian modern poetry and, in English, *The Naturalist in the River Amazon*. Even an unexpected *Anatomia Avícola (Avian Anatomy)* was part of his library. In the darkroom there was, an empty can of Aymoré biscuits, now used to keep some negatives—identical in every detail to one I still have, left by my father. Fred used to talk about Brazilian magazines and newspapers he had received, many years ago, from his family, but I never was fortunate enough to find them.

In one of the newspapers, there was a story that Fred used to read to Max Ernst¹, and that made them both laugh. In a bus to Copacabana beach, in the last trip of the night, with only a few people, the driver saw a man who, according to the article, was “practicing an unnatural act.” The driver and his companion decided to stop and hold the man for the police, but he escaped, hiding in the hill beside the Copacabana Palace Hotel, the “Hill of Heaven.” With the help of a group of firemen, who came from a fire station nearby, they chased the man up and down the hill without success, until a police car (called “Happy Widow” for its loud siren and black and white colors) showed up and the man ran directly to it, into the arms of the cops. After a fight, the man was tightly tied—with lassos! He was taken to a police station, where “some abrasions and

contusions” were found on the prisoner, and after the proper identification of “the man who practiced an unnatural act”—the act was never revealed by the newspaper—he was thrown in the jail to lie there until who knows when.

We Brazilians are accustomed to much more ridiculous absurdities, coming from even more illustrious people; so this story, nowadays, may sound trivial. But for the German Max Ernst it probably illustrated, to the point of perfection, Fred’s idea that surrealism never needed to be invented in Brazil.

A few days after my coming to Prescott I was presented to Fred’s images in a ritual that I was going to see repeated many, many, times. A chair was placed in the living room, in front of the day bed—his bed, too—where there was a wooden stand waiting for the photographs. Incomplete silence, interrupted only by the sounds of my surprise, each one followed by his laughs, I saw, for the first and unforgettable time, a procession of some of the most magnificent photographic images ever produced. Made with criminal perfection, his prints transcend any kind of photographic perfection known to this moment. If the spectator has, at least, a regular intimacy with photographic techniques, he knows that “these things” are not only the result of optical and chemical procedures accessible to the average mortal, or even the most gifted. There is something more in Fred’s images, something which underlies, without material existence, untouchable: it is the materialization of the idea that the structure of an image, the quality of its design, is, before technique, responsible for the feeling of perfection that a work brings—a feeling that emanates from each of his photographs.

But it is obvious that the content of Fred Sommer’s images—its subject and the way he deals with it—had impressed me, too. How could someone be insensitive to so strange, and strong, images? Madly limitless landscapes, collages of unexpected things, a severed foot, chicken parts, dead coyotes and rabbits, broken toys, a child with a frightening look. His images provoke a considerable impact; everything is so different from the

kind of photographs we're accustomed to, the density and complexity of the thoughts involved in it are so evident, that you can't avoid asking: "Who is the madman who did this? What could have brought him to this place?"

During the time I've lived in Prescott, I discovered in Fred a wonderful and genial "madman." I could see and understand his creative process; I lived, each moment, with the thoughts that formed, at same time, his art and his daily life, and which make of him a rare reunion of artist and wise man. On the other hand, my daily experience with him made my curiosity about his life in Brazil grow; the information brought out by our talks was no longer enough. I became more and more attracted by the idea of finding links between the years he lived in Rio de Janeiro and the absolutely unique body of work he developed in the US.

My aim, in '84, was to develop my own work, which I think I've done, honoring my obligation with the intense and committed collaboration I received from Fred. Now, the moment has come to dedicate my time to him, trying to unravel the significance of his life in Brazil and presenting, to the country where his personality took shape, the work of one of the most vital artists of the whole history of photography.

1. The German painter Marx Ernst (1891-1976) lived in the United States between 1941 and 1953. He met the American painter Dorothea Tanning in 1943, moving with her to Sedona, an Arizona town Northeast of Prescott. Max Ernst and Fred Sommer first met in 1941 in a party in Beverly Hills (the photographer Man Ray was also there) where Fred showed him his photographs. Ernst visited Prescott in 1943 to see more of Fred's work and also to select some of

Fred's drawings for the surrealist magazine *VVV*. (Published in 1944, the opening essay—"La Pensé est Une et Indivisible", by Benjamin Péret, coincidentally related to Brazil) It was the beginning of a friendship between them.

Péret's relation to Brazil points to a series of coincidences which linked many people who, in many cases, had never met. Benjamin Péret, whose article was accompanied by Fred's drawings, was married to Elsie Houston, a Brazilian singer whose sister Mary was to be wife of Brazilian art critic Mario Pedrosa. Lucio Costa, the famous architect who also helped the organization of the IV Pan-American Congress of Architects (1930), told me he met Mary Houston on the boat he was coming back from France on, in 1927, and was beaten by her in game of hangman by the word "Le Corbusier."

Frederick Sommer: An Annotated Chronology 1905-1930

The basis for this chronology was Frederick Sommer's chronology in *Venus, Jupiter and Mars*, organized by Barbara Wendel and Charles Metzger, which was substantially enlarged and eventually corrected, as indicated in the footnotes.

The interlaced text by Fred Sommer is kind of a collage. It comes, first, from my taped interviews with him between April 7 and 10, 1990 in Prescott, Arizona; second, from the long videotape of his interview with Harold Jones, made in 1976 at the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona, Tucson. Three tapes containing the whole interview were kindly provided by the Center.

Some information about the Brazilian architecture of the time covered is included to help in the building of an image of Fred's life in Brazil.

Everything precedes something else. We do not work with what is going to happen tomorrow: we work with what already has happened to us in the past, because we've become sensitized to this. We take this forward, we find conditions to which this can connect—that is progression. And, you know, this really goes back, ultimately, to the Brazilian flag, which says “Ordem e Progresso.” — all italicized quotes in this section are by Frederick Sommer, 1990

1905

Born, in Italy, Fritz Sommer, the first child from Carlos and Julia Bertold Sommer. Carlos Sommer was German, from the Hartz, born probably in 1875 and died in Rio de Janeiro in 1938, at 63. Julia Sommer was born in the Uster, Switzerland, in 1868 and died in Rio de Janeiro at 94, in 1962.

I was born in a small Italian town, South of Naples—to be more accurate, south of Mount Vesuvius, 3 miles West from Pompeii. This was on September 7, 1905. The name of the town is Angri—like been angry, but with an i.

My parents had met, I believe, in Naples; my father was interested in the world of plants, with the development of seeds for the growing of various species which he sold and shipped to many different places in Europe. He was interested in botany, too.

Born Enrico Sommer, Fritz' only brother.¹

My brother and I had grown up speaking Italian—it was the current language of our home—but we're accustomed to a little German and French, too. When I was three years old my family went to Northern Europe, to German and Switzerland; it was then that we learned German. For some years, we lived in many different towns. Even born in Italy and having lived in Europe for seven years, I was really raised in Brazil.



Enrico and Fritz,
ca. 1912

1913

The family moves to São Paulo, Brazil, because of Carlos' interest in tropical plants, from his working with ornamental plants and flowers. Under the name of Frederico Sommer, Fritz learns Portuguese and begins his formal education in “Deutsche Schule zu Vila Mariana”, renamed Colégio Benjamin Constant, a German school in Vila Mariana.

In 1913, my family decided to go to Brazil, to São Paulo—I was seven years old—where we were for about three years. I have a fairly sure recollection that I was 10 when we went to Rio de Janeiro; it was 1916, middle of the First World War. I remember my parents saying how lucky we were in having left Europe.

I remember very clearly the boys playing soccer in the streets, whenever they could; it was a great passion. It is from Brazil that came the main recollections of my childhood, and the basis for my formation. When you're raised in a place, it's there where you belong.

“Whenever I heard Fred speak of his life there it was with respect and fondness. He always sounded very proud of his roots in Brazil. Almost aristocratic.” (Harold Jones)²

1916

Family moves to Rio de Janeiro, where the father opens a flower store and an office where he contracted landscaping projects for gardens.³ His greenhouse was in Sit, Mines Gears, then a district

of Barbican, north town of Antonio Carlos. He seems to have leased the land from Manoel Carlos Pereira de Almeida.

The family locates in the Hotel Brasil-Itália, on General Pedra Street; later they move to Vila Isabel, near to Jorge Rudge Street, in the vicinity of the Instituto João Alfredo, a technical school where Carlos Sommer may have taught.⁴ The young Frederico goes, again, to a German School—Colégio Cruzeiro, at Carlos de Carvalho Street—and, at the age of eleven, begins helping his father with architectural drawings.

I remember the very incident which made my father suggest I start drawing for him. He was working together with somebody at home, standing around a large map, discussing what they're going to do with this kind of park I think it was actually the very large grounds of some institution, with beautiful trees that had to be respected. It seemed they're vacillating, and I said, "Why don't you do this, in such and such a way?" They looked at me like saying, "What this kid doing? Who does he think he is?" My father knew I had already picked through his books, but he didn't realize how much I had absorbed from them. The interesting thing is that they eventually followed my suggestion—or they just decided in the same direction—so I had the absolute satisfaction of knowing that something that I suggested at 11 was done. And, as far as I know, nobody was sorry about. In the school, I looked at the other kids thinking, "These poor kids, what do they know about what they're doing? I have done something very real—and important. . . ." Since that time my father showed a very positive attitude, always supporting my liberty to go ahead and do things.

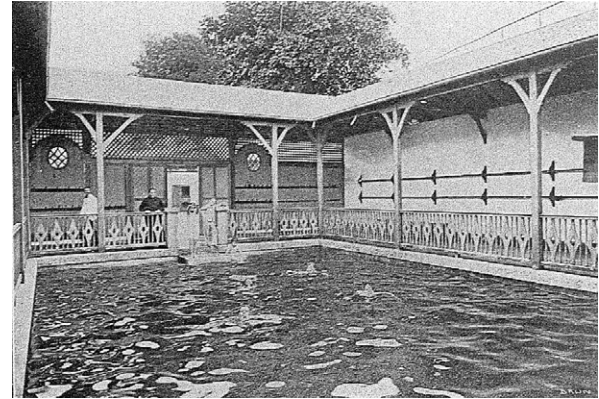
Transfers to Ginásio de São Bento, whose registers still show the name of Frederico Carlos Sommer, enrolled in the years of 1920, 1921 and 1922. As we learn from those dates, he doesn't graduated from the *ginásio*—which he has confirmed. In his first year in the new school, receives honorable mention among the students of Braz Vasconcellos, drawing teacher.

I don't remember this distinction in drawing, and just briefly the teacher. I used to draw very well. I have no patience to "learn" what I already knew—I think I attended to just a few classes. . . .

I wasn't particularly outstanding in school, as usually expected from a good student, but I was already alert to many different things. I used to read and to draw a lot, should be considered a flighty student—which means that my interests spread away from the limits of school. Perhaps my capacity as a student wasn't underrated, but the span of my interests and my capacity of learning and comprehending things, this they couldn't rate.

Dom Meinrado Mattmann, a Swiss, was the Dean and English teacher as well. I remember quite well Gentil Feijó, a small and elegant man, an excellent French teacher. I saw him, many years later, after my degree in the US, at the Avenida Rio Branco. He used to teach the girls at the Escola Normal, too; for us, the São Bento's boys, it was almost like having an informer.

The school has a pool, called Tanque de banhos (bathtub): it was something fantastic, surrounded by a beautiful, iron, lattice work, with salt water piped directly from the sea, 190 feet below!



Swimming pool, Ginásio de São Bento, 1920
(São Bento Monastery)

I remember some of my classmates. Just by chance, the most brilliant and elegantly dressed was black, which saved me from considering the whites superior to anyone. We used to play soccer; I liked it very much. I played goalkeeper, and probably not that good. I still can list some professional

players of that time: Pastor, Junqueira, Candiota, Orlando, Nonô. . . . “Flamengo” used to have a southerner, I think his name was Kunz. Another from the South was Friedenreich, who played in São Paulo, was very famous.

Something I always remember about my past is that each time I changed countries and languages—from Italian to German, from German to Portuguese, an even in Brazil, from a German school in São Paulo to another German school in Rio and from there to the Ginásio de São Bento—I lost some credit in school. This made me walk backwards, to learn again and again the same things I had already learned. You see, I spent my childhood recapitulating. . . . But the truth is, in what concerns my education, I can’t name but the São Bento.

My father had many books, books on art and architecture, encyclopedias. And the library of the Monastery was magnificent! I used to look at it, marveled, through its keyhole. It was in that time that I began to learn the tremendous and profound value of books. Culture really remains in books and the access to them should be everyone’s right.

1921

At the age of fifteen and a half, during the summer vacations, Frederico apprenticed at Escritório Técnico Heitor de Mello, the office of the architects Archimedes Memória and Francisco Cuchet. The contact with Archimedes Memória was done through an acquaintance of Carlos Sommer, Benno Treidler, a German

watercolorist and painter, and Memória's father-in-law. Treidler has gained a reputation for his decorative paintings in residences. He is, today, a well rated artist at auctions in Rio de Janeiro.⁵

In the year before the International Exhibition in Rio, 1921, on summer vacation—through some of my father's acquaintances—I went to work as apprentice to the finest architectural firm in Rio. Apparently, it was the right moment, because the next year there would be a lot of designing and building in Rio. I was fifteen, fifteen and a half, to be precise. When you're active that young, half a year counts. . . .

The firm had many architects and draftsman, about a third of them were Europeans, Swiss and French. I used to talk in French with them; my mother spoke French very well—what she spoke the least, in a sense, was Portuguese, because she couldn't avoid the confusion with Italian words. Just like what I do now, I really never bothered to learn Spanish, because I can make an artificial Spanish from Italian and Portuguese. When I'd go to Mexico they understood me perfectly, but they wondered what I was speaking.

I always was a good apprentice, a quick learner. But to the slow pace of school I always preferred to sit in the street cafes and talk with older people. Perhaps it is an exaggeration to say that one of the important points of Brazil was, for me, to sit there and talk, but it's true: this was part of the whole, a most important part.

At the age of sixteen, in the name of his father's office, Frederico enrolls in an architectural competition for landscaping and planning of the Ponta do Calabouço. The winner was "Eureka," a project by the architects Angelo Bruhns and José Cortez; Frederico Sommer won the second prize.⁶

I was almost 16 when this competition came up. There was some area that had been enlarged with the fill from a hill, the Morro do Castelo, which had been removed, and they wanted a plan for the use and landscaping of such area. I went to work on this, in my father's name. I did the whole thing, not only the drawings, and I got the second prize, and the competition involved some top people. You see, never so bright in school, but I was always doing very well.

The Instituto Brasileiro de Arquitetos was founded in January; months later a splinter group formed, called the Sociedade Central de Arquitetos.

1922

"Encouraged by a community that does not discriminate against youth" takes private landscape commissions.⁷ It is probably from this year that the project for a garden to a house along the way to Urca was started.⁸

By the time I was seventeen, I was already contracting; even working with my father, he always would let me go and negotiate with the customers, make the estimates, and even designing my own things. There's still a garden in Rio—some people have reported seeing it some years ago—a comparatively small garden but with absolutely beautiful hedges, done with great simplicity. From

what these people told me, it remained almost untouched, with the hedges formed by great balls of ficus benjamin and a marigolds' yellow carpet.

The Republic's Centenary is celebrated in Rio with the International Exhibition. The dominant architectural style is the neo-colonial, opposed to the soon-to-be-developed modernist ideas.

“The modern wave inaugurated by literature, painting and sculpture only later has reached architecture. In the twenties, it never took more space than a few polemic newspaper articles and hesitant essays.”¹⁰

In that time, Archimedes Memória was the top architect in Rio (and Rio was the top city in Brazil). “Grandes Composições” Professor in the Escola Nacional de Belas Artes—in which he followed his master Heitor de Mello—Memória took an important place in the '22 exhibition.

Henrique tells that Frederico collaborated with the drawings for the project of the Great Industries Pavilion—today the National Historic Museum, designed by Memória and Cuchet. Among Memória's other projects must be mentioned the Assembléia Legislativa building in Rio de Janeiro.

Archimedes Memória—a Northerner, a remarkable figure, elegant and aristocratic—was an important presence in Fred's life. His office was a meeting place for many intellectuals and almost all of the Rio de Janeiro architects. Fred frequently speaks of how much this meant, in his life; the long talks sitting in the Rio de Janeiro street cafes, probably shared by some of the Memória colleagues.

There is someone I will never forget, Archimedes Memória—well, with this name¹⁰ He was an well known architect, a handsome man, always wearing a Panama hat and white linen cloths. His office was responsible for the most important projects of Rio de Janeiro.¹¹

1923

Publishes an essay in literary magazine.¹² The connection with some Rio intellectuals and poets was established through the secretary of the American Naval attaché, a man of letters.

It was through my father that I met somebody who was a poet and was very well connected with the world of poetry in Rio. And I remember in two or three occasions going with him to meetings which brought together some of the big-shots, people really “avant-garde.” It was a pleasure, and a discovery, to see the cohesion, the enthusiasm, and the way they moved about. Brazil was already a world given to speech—Brazilians loved to sit around and talk, and they don’t shoot the breeze, they formed and they manipulated beautifully coherent things.

They asked me if I would write some essays for this new publication that came up, which I did. And, some days later, my father came home one evening and said, “You know, I just ran into Mr. So-and-So this afternoon. And he said, “Mr. Sommer, I just saw a beautiful magazine on the stand, I

picked it up, and there was a short essay by some Frederico Sommer, do you know who he is?" My father said, "What! That's my son!" He didn't know anything about it yet.

I have a vague recollection of an essay I wrote about Michelangelo, some ideas I put together from my readings. It's hard to imagine how I did it but somehow it had coherence. It already had some of the things I search for now if I make a small essay or try to work a paragraph. I really enjoy shaping ideas; it's so hard for me to get started, but at the same time I take tremendous pleasure in just making things look right. There's some relation with photography: most of what we perceive visually—our first contact with things is visual—is connected with the display of the words which describe the perception. The relation is structural. I do regret that there is not much more care done to the form, the structure, and the coherence of the page.

1924

The idea of traveling to the US begins to take shape, following an invitation by William Gratwick,¹³ an American businessman who knows of Frederico's father's greenhouse through the American embassy.

I would have eventually come to the United States. But some circumstances turned out to offer themselves in a very spontaneous way. My father knew the American ambassador very well. This man was not only a competent diplomat; he was someone very knowledgeable. He had received a visitor, a gentleman from Buffalo, New York, visiting for some weeks with his wife and daughter. The ambassador suggested that he should come to my father, since he was a collector of rare plants,

interested in some tropical species. My father apparently thought that he might be able to locate those plants. In just a few days, my father had found the plant and had them already very carefully wrapped. In due time, this gentleman showed up again and he was, of course, delighted to see all these plants, a group he never would have found through commercial channels. He wanted to know how much he owed and, diplomatically, my father said, "it was just a nice chance to take a day off and look at the real green out there." By the time I drifted in and I got to talk with this gentleman, and it turned out he had a son about my age fifteen possibly one year older, who, I discovered later, was also going to study, or was already studying, landscape architecture, which acted as sort of a bond. He asked me—he spoke some German, which helped, because my English wasn't all that good—if I have any thoughts about visiting United States sometime. And I told him yes, that I did, because from what I had seen in magazines I was very much interested in what was going on there. I wasn't thinking in studying, in universities, I was already doing things. I was really thinking of professional connections with some office to work there. He said, "Well, this is not a bad idea, it can be done that way. What you must do, if you do come to the States, is to come and see me and I'll do everything I can to facilitate things."

Some weeks after he left, he wrote to my father to thank him, and said that all plants were already properly installed in his greenhouse and prospering. I wrote him and told him that I was still entertaining the idea of coming and I hope to, perhaps in a year or so, be prepared to go. As it turned out, it took considerably less than a year for me to be aboard. This was, I would say, in June 1925. The company was "Monson Line" and the boat was bound for Hoboken, New Jersey.

With the fusion of the Instituto Brasileiro de Arquitetos and the Sociedade Brasileira de Arquitetos, the Instituto Central de Arquitetos is formed.

1925

Travels to the United States where, through Gratwick, meets Bryant Fleming, who introduces him to Edward Gorton Davis, architect and Director of the Landscape Architecture Department of Cornell University. He works for some time at Davis' office, establishing with him a close relationship.

I was bound for Buffalo, New York, where Mr. Gratwick had his office, at The Chamber of Commerce building. I think I got there on a weekend. It was pretty stunning: the great density of occupation, the buildings, but at the same time the unbelievable sense of order. In those days, like for years after, everybody in this world was acquainted with the United States through Hollywood: everybody had three bathrooms and every house was large—because they use wide-angle lenses.

I didn't have very precise plans in my mind. I was visualizing myself essentially having a chance to see how these landscape architecture projects were carried through, how the offices work here, what these properties look like: to widen my own vision. I hadn't set any time to stay; but I would imagined maybe two or three years. Then, I'd take back to Brazil the new experience and knowledge.

The Russian born Brazilian Architect Gregori Warchavchik publishes his manifesto *Acerca da Arquitetura Moderna (On Modern Architecture)*—the departing point for the modernist conception on Brazilian architecture.

“The document was almost unperceived.”¹⁴

1926

Enrolls at Cornell University as a graduate student. “When confronted by his lack of traditional academic credentials, obtains letter of certification in architecture and fine arts from Brazilian Ministry of Education.”¹⁵ His Master’s thesis was done under guidance of Professors Gorton Davis, Edward Lawson and W. H. Suchardt. Meets future wife, Frances Watson, at a party at Davis’ place. She was a Cornell student doing graduate work in education.

Just after going to Cornell I was hired by Davis to be his “assistant.” He had seen my drawings—he was impressed by the way I was using colors—you know, that kind of “tropical exuberance.” After some months, I became aware of some of his characteristics, for instance, he used to refer to a Japanese student who worked with him many years before. And I understood that he already had been involved and impressed by “different” people. He was practicing to adapt himself to what was different—this is creativity.

1927

Receives Master in Landscape Architecture degree with thesis “Villa Alba, a Residential Property.” Returns to Rio to form a business partnership with his father. The office was at Rio Branco Avenue, 9, third floor. With his brother Henrique, who is heading to Paris, travels to the State of Bahia to meet Anisio Teixeira.¹⁶



Fredrico Sommer,
Cornell, 1927

Gregori Warchavchik begins to build the first modernist house in Brazil: São Paulo, Vila Mariana, Santa Cruz Street.

1928

Marries Frances on August 23 in United States. The same year they move to Rio de Janeiro.

“... it should have been a remarkable experience for a Brazilian to come up in 1925 and go to a graduate school at Cornell and marry a woman from the Midwest with a very conservative background.” (Thomas Carabasi)¹⁷



Frances
Watson,

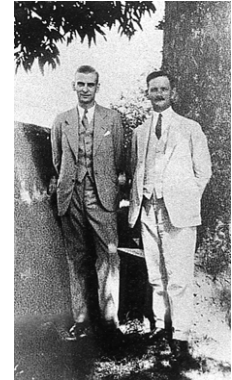
Why should I want another type of familiar situation? I like what I have, it's very, very good. In this country, however, anybody holds his own problems against the family.

One of the wonderful things about Frances is that she never passed judgment on anyone, she never saw any value in this kind of behavior. Perhaps this is the reason for saying that she is the important person in this home—she's much more about the basics.

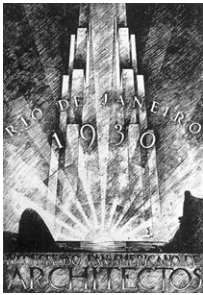
1928 - 1930

Mainly as consultant, works in different projects in the towns of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo and in the states of Bahia and Paraná. In Rio, collaborates in the organization of the IV Pan-American Congress of Architects, as member of the Thesis Commission. According to Wendel and Metzger's chronology, awarded a gold medal in the same Congress.¹⁸

Well, I was given some gold medal. But it had nothing to do with the Congress, perhaps with the International Exposition of '22. In that time, at least, they were quite liberal with those medals..



Frederico and Carlos
Sommer, 1928



Layout for poster.
(Biblioteca Nacional)

Designs a project for a poster advertising the Congress, which was published twice in “Architettura” magazine (N° 4, September 1929 and N° 8, January 1930) to which he was collaborating since its beginning.

Designs two stamps commemorating the Congress. From this time, clearly remembers his fellows Edgar Vianna and Raphael Galvão, besides the name of Lucio Costa.



One of the stamps designed by Fred, and issued by Brazilian mail on the IV Congresso Pan Americano de Arcitectos (Luiz Carlos Felizardo)

After a short time living in a boarding house in Flamengo, a section of Rio, the couple moves to Alcindo Guanabara Street, 15/1102, also in Rio.



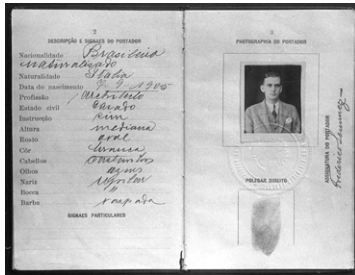
It should have been in '29 or '30; I think it was on New Year's Day, 1929, Frances and I were walking by the beach, at noon, and she called my attention to a very high and straight pole—without any trace of a shadow around. Never in her life had she seen a thing like this.

Rua Alcindo Guanabara 115,
1990. (Luiz Carlos Felizardo)

In 1929, Le Corbusier gives a lecture at the Escola Nacional de Belas Artes. Fred Sommer says he felt himself closer to the modernist ideas, and began to profess ideas against the conservative neo-colonial style. In relation to this, it is interesting to know what happened to his two friends: Edgar Vianna—graduated in Pennsylvania and was responsible in Brazil for an exotic “Mission Style”—remained, after 1930, close to the most conservative stream, while Raphael Galvãois recorded as one of the first adept of modernism.

1930

In May, 23, talking with some friends in a cafe, Frederico Sommer has a coughing fit which sends him to a doctor. Diagnosed as suffering from tuberculosis, the only possible cure is total rest. He and Frances leave the country in June to Arosa, in Switzerland. He never comes back to Brazil or to the practice of architecture.



I remember when I was buying our tickets, preparing our trip to Europe; it was an Italian ship line, I think, at the Avenida Rio Branco. Suddenly, I felt as I was a marked man—and, at same time, a free man. It was quite a strange feeling; strange and, in some way, beautiful. . . . In one of my walks along the Avenida Rio Branco, I came in a store where they used to have a kind of exhibitions of rare and very expensive objects—they just had finished an exhibition of imported books. I remember quite well, I bought two books—which I still have and which were basic to me. From then on, there was nothing I bought that was not basic.¹⁹

Fred's passport, issued 06.10.30,
18 days after his collapse

“When he went back to Europe, through his understanding of four languages he began to graft onto himself some elements of these cultures. He was like, in miniature, the melting pot which made America.” (Emmet Gowin)²⁰



In the end of the year, the IV Pan American Congress of Architects takes place in Rio.

Collaborators to “Arquitectura” magazine. Frederico Sommer was listed sometimes as landscape architect, sometimes as urban planner. (Biblioteca Nacional)

In December, the young architect Lucio Costa is hired to be Director of the Escola Nacional de Belas Artes— which leaves the older teachers full of resentment; however, when his term is cut short, by conservative pressures in September, 1931, his removal creates an irreversible revolution in the spirit of the old school, preparing the path for modernism.

“We can split the history of our architecture in two well defined parts, or epochs: before 1930 and after 1930.”²¹

“Architecture never more came through, in the same space of time, so great a transformation.”²²

The “Lucio Costa affair” in the Escola Nacional de Belas Artes makes us go back again to Archimedes Memória. He was the leader of the conservative reaction to Lucio’s “modernisms,” and he took over the direction of the Escola after expelling the brilliant young master. This began a period marked by Memória’s fierce resistance to the pressure of the students and younger architects. Later on, in 1934, he is the center of another, and more serious, episode: he won the competition for the building of the Ministry of Public Health and Education—but the project was never built. The Minister Gustavo Capanema, was disappointed with the winning project—in a preposterous “Marajoara style”—and got from the President Getulio Vargas the necessary support to pay the prize won by Memória, but to contract some younger and more “modern” people to design the building. He asked Lucio Costa to be the leader of the team which would be responsible—based on Le Corbusier’s first draft—for this symbolic project that marked the beginnings of modern Brazilian architecture.

Archimedes Memória’s reaction would enter the history of Brazilian architecture and, unfortunately, to the history of the difficult relationship between culture and power in Brazil: Memória, then a well-known participant of the fascist “Integralista” Party wrote a letter to President Getulio Vargas,²⁴ denouncing Lucio Costa as one of the “many affiliates to the modernist stream which is centered around the Modern Art Club, a communist cell whose main goals are the agitation of the artistic world and the abolishment of any real values away from his own beliefs.” Memória gives to the episode “no lesser gravity, knowing that this architect has a partnership with Gregori Warchavchik, a Russian Jew of suspicious attitudes. . . .”

1. Henrique Sommer is still in Brazil, in São João da Boa Vista, state of São Paulo. There we met and I interviewed him for this research. He studied in the same schools as his brother—he's registered in Ginásio de São Bento under the name of Henrique Jorge Sommer. For many years, he worked as draftsman at the architectural office of Archimedes Memória; he also worked in the Organizações Ruf. Since 1930, when Fred left Brazil, Frances Sommer, Fred's wife, has maintained written contact with Henrique.
2. Harold Jones is photographer, historian and photography curator, having worked at George Eastman House, the Light Gallery, and at The Friends of Photography. In 1976, the year of his interview with Fred, he was Director of the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona at Tucson. Currently, Mr. Jones teaches at the Faculty of Fine Arts in the same University. The quoted text is from a letter he wrote to me in December, 1990.
3. Henrique Sommer told me that his father's business was called *Floricultura Mineira*. Roberto Burle-Marx, the late, noted, Brazilian landscape architect and artist, remembered a Carlos Sommer working for the firm SCHLICK-NOGUEIRA —Casa Flora. If his memory is to be trusted, this is just coincidence. Many North-American sources refer to Carlos Sommer as “landscape architect,” which Fred cannot confirm.
4. The Instituto João Alfredo is on Avenida 28 de Setembro, at Vila Isabel. The Instituto wasn't able to give more information on Carlos Sommer.
5. In “Depoimento de um Arquiteto Carioca,” Lucio Costa comments on Benno Treidler's work, calling him a “renown watercolorist.” (Correio da Manhã, Rio de Janeiro, June 15, 1951, republished in “Arquitetura Moderna

Brasileira: depoimento de uma geração,” São Paulo, PINI/ABEA/FVA, 1987, Alberto Xavier, org., p. 83.4

6. Henrique Sommer remembers the competition but not its result. According to Architect Maria Helena Flynn, it took place later on, probably in 1924, promoted by the Mayor Alaor Prata. After the competition, there was some question as to whether the Mayor had the right to sell the area, and the project was never built. Many years later, the same place was transformed as the Aeroporto Santos Dumont, designed by the brothers Marcelo and Milton Roberto.

7. Wendel, Barbara and Metzger, Charles, “Chronology,” in *Venus, Jupiter and Mars*, Wilmington, Delaware Art Museum, 1980 (John Weiss, ed.), p. 57.

Fred frequently says that Brazil was a country which respected youth; after all, he began to work very young, and was apparently always well received by adults. It is difficult, however, to know if this resulted from a national characteristic or if it comes from his precocious maturity.

8. The exact location is uncertain, but according to friends of Fred’s who visited the area, the garden was still there in the middle seventies. According to Henrique Sommer this was the front garden to the house of Mr. Vivacqua—a coffee merchant, and father of Temístocles Vivacqua, a classmate of Henrique’s.

9. Santos, Paulo Ferreira, *Quatro Séculos de Arquitetura*, Rio de Janeiro, Instituto de Arquitetos do Brasil, 1981

10. Memória = Memory

11. From a 1984 conversation about Brazil. At that time Fred didn't relate Memória to his apprenticeship, and his recollections were fairly vague. With my coming back in 1990 to discuss specifically about his life in Brazil, Fred's memory cleared up, remembering facts and names and showing a renewed intimacy with Portuguese.

12. The Wendel and Metzger's chronology (ob. cit., p. 57) says: "Accepted into circle of Brazilian poets and writers; publishes several essays in literary magazines." For everything I've heard from Fred himself, this seems to be an evident exaggeration. There is no further information about this article; Fred can't remember the name of magazine or the names of the people involved.

13. William Gratwick Jr., presumably deceased, was a landscape architect. He wrote a book about his father's property, "It Must Have Been a Lovely Place When It Was Kept Up." In his letter of December 1990, Harold Jones writes: "In the late 60's I was a curator at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. Minor was living in Boston then. My bosses were Nathan Lyons and Beaumont Newhall. I heard the Gratwick's name mentioned quite often by Nathan and Beaumont. The Gratwick's seemed to be friendly with visiting and local photographers. Everyone spoke very fondly about him - with affection—but I never knew what the connection between them all was. I seem to remember visiting their place once; I recall an 'estate' that had once been neatly trimmed and cared for - but no longer. It was wildly overgrown. I could be mistaken about this. The book you refer to seems to suggest I was at the Gratwick place."

Nathan Lyons told me, in São Paulo, June, 1991, that as long as he knew him, Gratwick was "an eccentric" who transformed his father's place into a kind of informal arts center which was used for lectures on literature to domestic opera, and which sheltered different types of artists.

Fred tells that one of his first recollections of the United States was traveling with the Gratwick family and stopping at a gas station where Gratwick Jr. worked as an attendant—in spite of coming from a very wealthy background and being just a few weeks from entering the Harvard school of architecture. “In Brazil this would be impossible: the concerns about social status were far too big.”

14. Santos, Paulo ob. cit.

15. Wendel, Barbara e Metzger, Charles ob.cit., p.58.

Brazilian Ministry of Education (and Public Health) was created in 1934. The Ministry which dealt with those affairs was the Ministry of Justice and Interior Affairs. There’s no way to get any documents about this, since no files from this period still exist. According to Fred, the Brazilian government promoted the matriculation and graduation of Brazilian architects and urban planners.

16. According to Henrique, Fred first met Anisio Teixeira in the United States. According to Fred—who never referred to this—his trip to Bahia was connected to his professional work as consultant: he intended to meet the brother-in-law of one of his father’s agents, in some way related with the government. Anisio Teixeira—who turned out to be the most important name of Brazilian education, the creator of the University of Brasília, a well-known educator throughout the world —was, then, Secretary of Public Education of the State of Bahia.

One day of September 1991, in Fred’s house in Prescott, something awakened his memory: he suddenly emerged from the kitchen to give me the news: “I’ve just remembered the name of that small man from Bahia: Anisio Teixeira! I’ve met him during my time at Cornell, some weekend I went to Harvard with friends. He was a very bright young man, very bright.”

Fred doesn't remember all the names of the people with whom he worked; some of them, like Anisio's, seemed to reveal some kind of inattention, of disregard. But we need to understand that his departure from Brazil in a moment of serious personal crisis and the deep and definitive changes that happened, lead him apart from people and things from Brazil. That meant that Fred didn't know—until I told him—that Anisio came to be an outstanding educator, as he didn't know what the future held back to Archimedes Memória and Lucio Costa. In fact, he was surprised when he heard me tell of the 1930 Revolution in Brazil, which began only four months after his leaving.

17. Thomas Carabasi, a young photographer from Pennsylvania, worked with Fred between 1978 and 1982, after working with Paul Caponigro. Since then, his relationship with the Sommers is very close. His interview about Fred was recorded in April 22, 1990, in his home in Philadelphia.

18. Wendel, Barbara e Metzger, Charles ob.cit., p. 58.

Fred Sommer left Brazil in June; the Congress took place in the end of the year, which invalidates the information—as his good-humored testimony confirms.

As to works done during this time, no information is available. Fred always told me about his going to Bahia and Paraná as work trips, but I never could gather enough information to lead anywhere. I only know that, from Bahia, from the *pitanga* fields, he keeps memories of wonder.

19. The two books bought by Fred Sommer in this opportunity were Jacob Burckhardt's *Civilization of Italian Renaissance* and Benedetto Croce's *Aesthetic*. Both are still at his library in Prescott.

20. Emmet Gowin is one of the most important names in the modern, North-American, photography. He was a student of Harry Callahan's; since his meeting with Fred Sommer in 1967, Sommer's influence on his imaging and thought can be sensed. A close friend of Fred's, he and his family are constant visitors at Prescott. Emmet is Professor of Photography at Princeton University, his interview was recorded at April 24 and 25, 1990 in Newton, Pennsylvania, where he lives.
21. Souza, Abelardo de, *Arquitetura no Brasil*, São Paulo, Livraria Diadorim Editora / USP, 1978
22. Costa, Lucio ob. cit, p. 72-94
23. Archimedes Memória's letter was made public by Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade in his article "O Ministro que Desprezou a Rotina" ("The Minister Who Despised Routine"), published in *Módulo* magazine (40, 21-22, September 1975) and, later, in Alberto Xavier's book *Arquitetura Moderna Brasileira; depoimento de uma geração*. Xavier's book collects most information on the 20-30 decade in Brazilian architecture. Carlos Drummond de Andrade was secretary to the Brazilian Minister of Education of the period, Gustavo Capanema.

Fred Sommer Speaks

This text is a collage, made up of excerpts from different sources, organized in such a way to suggest a coherent sequence. In addition to four recorded conversations with Frederick Sommer, April 1990, the sources used are (see Bibliography for more detailed information):

- CASSEL, James: *Frederick Sommer: Time, Life and Death*
COCHRAN, J. R.: *An Artist Who Seeks Out Riddles*
DIAMONDSTEIN, Barbaralee: *Visions and Images - American Photographers On Photography*
JACOBS, David: *Frederick Sommer: The Limits of Photography*
SOMMER, Frederick: *Sommer*Words; The Poetic Logic of Art and Aesthetics; Aperture 10:4, 1962*
WEISS, John: *A Durable Fiction*

Fortunately, we have a long acquaintance—that helps a lot—so you know that, generally speaking, I'm not mad.

Everything is part of a continuity, one large continuity that started when I was very young, because everybody is young at some point.

I was living in Rio, in Brazil, which is literally at the edge of the jungle, the beautiful rain forest is all around it. I got interested in these things; it was easy. The exotic is easy to come by. It is the discipline to understand the exotic that is difficult.

We cannot do anything now that we haven't done before. So that does connect with my original education. Where do I get this type of curiosity? Sometimes they ask themselves, "How did he make this synthesis here?" And, in fact, the important thing to understand about this is that there is no synthesis of something that has not been put together sometime before.

Some facts are important to establish, but I would not spend too much time doing research on that. I would like to see more research done on the ideas that this represents. The interesting thing about this is that it's not going to be too well received, because I have lived long enough to see, I've met resistance. And it is not that I personally have met resistance — ideas have met resistance, at least in this country. And don't be that sure about Brazil; I have lived down there and I know there is resistance. There's a lot of resistance everywhere against ideas.

But we better forget about countries. Lets talk about me and my work, and I'll be talking about Brazil. I don't know much else to start with.

The hard way to go through life is to choose one path and stick to it, and it might be the wrong choice.

But I never made the choice. I go from one thing to another as it interests me.

Long ago, I had great appreciation for chance, finding things, trying to understand how they fit together. Every found object is another set of chance circumstances. Its completely new. The conformation of wood inside a piece of wood is always a new conformation. A found object is always a gentle conformation of what we already are, because we do not recognize what we are not.

What is the difference between what you find and what you make? You have to make it to find it. You have to find it to make it. And you only find things that already have in your mind.

It's unbelievable how the most unlikely things, at the most unlikely time, can fit together. And in the end, this connects with the relationship of position and occupier. This is so fundamental.

Position is the prime element of form and from position are derived all aspects of structure and form.

Elegance of form is the product of elegance of choice within specific limitations.

Quantitative and qualitative choice of positions in space and choice of occupiers for those positions define the logic of form.

Position and occupier build structure and content.
Structure and content together constitute form.

In a generalized condition of space,
the sum of all occupiable positions
is the potential for creation.

People thought, “What’s this Fred Sommer doing? Why do they let him do these things?” Well, they let me do this because they didn’t understand *at all* what I was doing. And they were quite sure that I was not a madman—but there was something they were missing.

Some felt I was strange, concocted, unphotographic. They said I manufactured subject matter, that my work was pathological. Many people said I was doing the medium harm. Credibility does not like to be strained. And I know now, of course, that I didn’t really strain people’s credibility too much; they just weren’t flexible.

People tend to hide things that are troublesome. Troubling attitudes, troubling situations are usually hidden. Some years ago, people built a pretty good closet to leave me in.

An educated person understands as lightly longer sentence, that’s all. That’s the only difference that education makes. And I happen to like these longer sentences at times. Why hold this against me, just because I practice being an educated person?

One can’t say that in the Middle Ages or in the Renaissance, people become interested in biological structure in order to shock anyone. How could anybody think that anything that I could do with a camera could

in any way annoy anybody's finer feelings, when they were giving consent to warfare on a scale unprecedented? I can't answer that. . . .

People always want a judgment: how good it is, how bad it is. It has nothing to do with that: *things are what they are.*

How can we afford to do things any less well than we can, if we respect what things are? At this point, I would like to have a little conference with, probably, the greatest of philosophers, Emmanuel Kant. Not about what he did; I would like him to explain why we perceive things the way they are in a display.

Most people think in tabulation; but the answer lies in display. Where tabulation accesses the value of things, only display can bring them to our attention.

What is it that display is teaching us? Quality of attention span has always been of the essence. In a display, it allows us to see the connection—our awareness to how things link or overlap; how this area affects that and how everything interconnects: the interrelation between fields. If anything about me is going to be remembered, that is some of it. If I said it here, or in Rio de Janeiro, does not matter.

So, I started to look more carefully at philosophy — in its own way, some philosophers had done considerable work to organize things. And I recognized that they were still thinking in parallel with religion. But religion does not think about the way things are: religion thinks about how things should be. It's not a bad idea, but rather impractical.

The world of art and the world of science deal with images about images, while the world of metaphysics and the world of religion deal very much with thinking about thinking. Thinking about thinking

can get so watered down, and the confusion so great, that the points get lost. Some of the things we are living through now, that we are reacting against, are the result of metaphysics and theology.

You never see artists; you see only art ... if you see anything. Nature itself respects only evidence. Nature is a continuation of evidence. The important thing to consider is that both art and science are more interested in evidence than in good intentions.

I began to realize that the only thing that is, ultimately, interdisciplinary, is Art. And, fortunately, I was not just working on the critical side. I don't have the idea that I am doing anything better than anybody else. I do a little bit of this, a little bit of that, and then if it works, I'm not scared to death about the idea. And I have no inferiority complex. Not to have an inferiority complex means that you naturally assume the possibility that something could also happen to you—it could be an accident, it could be something marvelous.

An individual has to walk the pace determined by his temperament in order to educate his feelings and his aptitudes. This capacity to reorder and transform what we learn is the creative process. Nobody has to be specially gifted to do this; this is the way it is. Ideas and thoughts collide and sort themselves out in these fruitful collisions. Confusion can be productive, if we accept the complexity of what is not yet understood. We should not be afraid of what our mistakes bring us; accidents can reorder the structure of our concerns. It is a question of how to strike a middle path between accepting what comes and optimistically doing some retouching. The predictive powers in all enterprise depend a great deal on enthusiasm. Without it, absolutely nothing happens.

Pessimism has a lot of prestige, but very little muscle. To be pessimistic *a priori* is unfair to the problem. It's not so important to be lucky; we've got to learn from our disasters. We can only learn from

the things that happened to us—that means that we have to have some respect for reality.

I accept what happens. I don't say to myself, "I wish this had not happened." One has to have respect for what perception brings to us—and to accept the consequences of one's moves.

From the only Greek word for sense perception comes the word "aesthetics"; it is absolutely important to understand that aesthetics is not particularly interested in beauty. Aesthetics is interested in the validating display.

Survival is not only the possibility of continuing just what we did yesterday; is the possibility of looking with favor to what can happen to us tomorrow. Nothing will ever put an end to chance, so respect for it is understandable. Any element of surprise should be welcomed. The important thing is not to be afraid: the unknown is more friendly than we know.

Our actions don't take place only because we want to make things better. In fact, when we do something with a willfulness of doing it right, we're lost. We do things for the sake of survival: if I wasn't still talking I would be dead; if I wasn't still impressionable, I would be dead. Sure, I'm dying slowly—oh, perhaps a little faster now!—and it takes patience to see oneself dying. . . .

Any time you take to repeat is time taken from something else. It isn't that I'm trying to be so fussy in the way I apportion time, because I am actually a very lazy person. I don't intend to become foolishly efficient to please the logic of command.

Even a good hen
does not lay
the same egg
over again

I never showed a lantern slide in my life, never projected a slide of anything. If people asked me to speak, they have to interact with me, because I don't go around with a prepared speech. A speaker cannot be any better than the audience.

I can be more productive lying on the beach than people forcefully doing things that are not very important to them, or inflicting things on others, in a logic of command. They have to do something, to build a machine, for instance. And now they have to occupy this machine, to keep it busy.

I built that beautiful 8" x 10", and you are asking me, "Have you used it?" No, I haven't. But yes, I have used it in a very specific way. After I got that camera, I looked through it—it's focused at infinity—and I was amazed, in stopping down and looking through the small hole, how much closer all things got. We are doing nothing different from the astronomers, who, in looking at infinity, find out where we are.

Thinking favors the cohesion of our ideas about art. There are many who say that art is a gut feeling, and they cannot talk about it. Anyone who is limited to that attitude has no right to be a teacher of art. I am not under the delusion that all things can be clarified, yet I believe our means of perception can be educated. I can excuse almost anyone being uneducated except an artist.

Photographers have to be educated to consider photography in the light of art and the history of

ideas. Images and ideas cannot function separately. Photography cannot afford an iconoclasm of ideas.

This is what so beautiful about photography: you can learn, and see within photography things that you cannot do on the basis of design and architecture alone. One architect can't teach another architect as easy as a good photographer can teach another photographer about design. People haven't realized this yet. That phenomenon serves humanity well. The awareness that people get through photography comes from insights displayed.

The point is that I find it congenial to work with something that keeps track of itself. I know that the image I see will make another good image. Nature is out there; the camera is in between. If you're just a midwife, the thing comes about. It is less the I. As artists we make art, but only as bystanders can we make aesthetics. For me, photography is rewarding because what I am really getting into is the world of aesthetics. Here is the peculiar phenomenon: these deadly machines, which everyone knows have no feeling, can be feelingly taken into our concerns. So I've been impressed with the real asset, with the real advantage, and with the real comfort that comes with simply accept that certain processes work for me. And they work for me best when I quit master-minding them. I no longer hope that things will obey; nothing will ever obey.

We're not so damned inspired every day! If we rely on what we meet, some inspiration will arise. As an example, if I go to a grocery store, no matter how beautifully stocked or lush it is in terms of display of fruit and edibles of all kinds, if I am smart I will take home what is best that day. Even if planning a banquet—something I seldom do, believe me—I plan from all the things I find there; I do this every time I go into a grocery store. I buy the best of what there is that day. If the beef looks good, I'm not going to buy lamb. I buy the best of the beef; if the best of the beef is expensive, I buy less of it. I buy carefully, so you can be sure I get a lot for my money. The store may have what you think you want that day. You are looking for pears. There may

be pears, but those pears may not be at their best. Confusion is not enriching if you try to unravel it. It is unraveled confusion if you impose upon yourself what is available and come back with bad meat and bad fruit. Take what is really there, and gradually build from it. You build your meal, your banquet; it's always a banquet when a few things are beautifully related. The point of this is that if you work this way or if you just live this way, you will find that by a coincidence of choice and chance you will have brought together a number of things which make a magnificent meal. You consume this with champagne if you can afford it, and if not, you consume it just with enthusiasm.

After 1930: Fred Sommer in the US

One of the most effective works from this series is “Chicken Entrails” from 1939. The glistening animal juices and the scattered remnants of flesh suggest that an act of violent sacrifice has just occurred. Killing a chicken and examining its entrails was an old means of divination in South America and Africa. To complicate the picture’s meaning, a membrane is pulled over the chicken’s head to form what appears to be a hood or cowl, like those worn by catholic monks.

Born in Italy but raised in Brazil, Sommer would likely gained an awareness of the rituals of the pervasive Catholic church, as well as the occult traditions of the native Indians and the legacy of the black African slaves. This may explain, in part,

what he had in mind when he took these visceral pictures. Ultimately, the work's complete symbolism is not discernible for Sommer prefers to suggest rather than reveal his intentions. As in a dream, the essence of this photograph lies deep within us. It has been sublimated by the veneer of culture and exists only in our subconscious.¹ —Van Deren Coke

Here is indeed a rarity! A photograph without the magnetic North usually provided by a literal and recognizable object. (If the comparatively new and ambivalent term *abstract expressionism* can be applied to a photograph, it can be applied to this one.) Non literal, or seemingly so, unrecognizable it gives us no point of intellectual orientation. Without that we do the next best thing—invent one. . . .

We must not forget that this photograph has a title. This may be treated as an anchor, or, depending upon the spectator, as a point of departure. “Sumaré” is Spanish (though misspelled) meaning summation. The summation here may be that of a moment or again of an eternity.² —John Upton

The two quotations that open this brief essay help to show the difficulties of analysis that Fred Sommer's work leaves to his critics, and the traps that his Brazilian past can build. The trap in which Van Deren Coke was caught was that of trying to find Brazilian roots in a surprising image (1939), without knowing about the country or about Fred's life in Rio. It takes a fair amount of imagination to see Fred Sommer as being influenced by gruesome

rituals or transposing his best memories of the São Bento monks to a chicken corpse.

California scholar John Upton was caught up in the trap of his own presumption, imagining the correct the artist himself. His ignorance of Portuguese and Spanish not only exposed him to the censure of some better informed reader but endangered his whole analysis of the work, based, in part, on the title he tried to decipher. However, to be fair with Mr. Upton I have to say that, even containing a wrong premise, his verbalization of so abstract a photograph sums it up beautifully, pun intended. Fred gave it this title, Sumaré, the name of a tropical mountain ridge, which he had walked along while in school. So, it was a feeling based on some nostalgia—a feeling that was alluded to in Mr. Upton's text. This shows his acute perception, as well as how successful Fred's complex image are in communicating his feelings.

Besides that, Fred takes an almost diabolic pleasure in finding titles full of hidden meanings—and in using in it words from other languages. There is, for example, another photograph named “Beato Saltador Alegre”(Portuguese for “Joyous Leaping Pious”); another one is named “Orminda,” a Portuguese name; one of his lectures was given the title “Do Conjunto da Realidade aos Velhos Limites” (from Reality as a Whole to the Old Limits).

Trying to identify a Brazilian past in Fred Sommer's photographs is a frustrating experience, ending up with hardly more than a few titles. His images speak more clearly of philosophy, of aesthetics, of structure and design. One of the most frequent ideas he develops through his images is the concept of *position and occupier* (a concept to be found in Architecture, his original discipline) besides his frequently leading the spectator to Art itself as source for reflection.

He is always reticent to talk about the intent of his images. He leaves to the observer the search for meaning. He sees as obvious even the presence of death in his photographs: after all, death is part of life. This

detachment from the impact created by the complexity of the relation subject/meaning displayed by his images was what made Edward Steichen define him as a man “from another planet. I have never known anyone who is so visually intense, yet so emotionally detached.”³

But Fred’s own opinion is different and warmer:



One can't say that in the Middle Ages or in the Renaissance, people become interested in biological structure in order to shock anyone. How could anybody think that anything that I could do with a camera could in any way annoy anybody's finer feelings, when they were giving consent to warfare on a scale unprecedented? I can't answer that. . . .

Members of the Comité Organizador do IV Congresso Pan American de Architectos, *Arquitetura* magazine, #8, January 1930. (Biblioteca Nacional)

Perhaps the main difficulty in finding expressions of his relation with Brazil, or trying an analysis of this relation, is that his departure from the country in 1930, diagnosed as having contracted tuberculosis, caused a real rupture in his life. Until '30, Fred was a talented young draftsman and architect well known and respected among his colleagues for landscape architecture, a field almost without other practitioners in the

Brazil of that time; with a Master's degree from the US, he was working with an outstanding group of people in the organization of a Pan-American Congress. After 1930, this profile totally disappears, to such an extent that it is difficult to identify, in the awakening artist of a few years later, the same Frederico Sommer who worked for Archimedes Memória and had an office at the Avenida Rio Branco.

So strong was this rupture that, in leaving Brazil, Fred erased from his life the family, the friends, the profession and even any perspective of work that a young and promising Brazilian architect could have expected. In fact, one can notice in his words that this rupture wasn't badly received at all; on the contrary, his reaction to the changes imposed by his illness was of some relief: he felt his condition was, at same time, that of a "marked man and a free man."

This might be a rationalization of today, calm because distant from the anxiety and fear that must have been sensed, and the feeling of being someone threatened by the immediacy of death. The truth is that tuberculosis was the agent for his liberation. He left Rio de Janeiro with a feeling of freedom born out of the absolute and irrevocable need to leave or die. The illusion of control over the future, which is the root for our responsibilities and daily torments, had been irremediably transformed. The possibility of death in short term altered all his life and thoughts; he became conscious that he could do anything he considered of importance without worrying about time or the near future.

The beginning of my experience is architecture, landscape architecture, and city planning. I was living and working in Rio de Janeiro when my health broke down, and the advice from the doctors was to get myself the best treatment for tuberculosis that I could find. It is quite a hop from Brazil to Switzerland, but within two weeks, my wife Frances and I were on our way. I then spent a year

in Arosa in the mountains of Switzerland seeing a doctor every six weeks, and the advice was to do a good deal of resting, eat well, and take two long walks a day.

It was during this time in Arosa that I had my first opportunity of working alone; no longer could I slip into some one's office and have a discussion about an architectural problem. So I began to entrust my thoughts and concerns to books and realized that I had to become much more familiar with what had happened in the past if I was to have some understanding of the future.⁴

Fred developed a particular way of understanding time. Many years later, in 1984, when we were working in his darkroom, and he was talking about the patience it takes to treat a print, he said something that summed up the way he approaches life and death:

I'm a man about to die. Therefore, the only thing I have is time.

I believe that an important part of his thinking comes from this crisis: the interest and the respect for chance, which led him to ideas and procedures which some would call surrealist —and to the conviction that one must accept the consequences of one's moves:

I accept what happens. I don't say to myself, "I wish this hadn't happen." Our only goal should be to follow the consequences of our moves, only then can our errors and successes be validated.

It doesn't make any difference what you do as long as you give consent to what you're doing.

Another central component to his work, clearly expressed in his first images: the awareness and acceptance of death as an essential component of life.

*The desperate are the greatest image makers
smoke signals at three paces
doctor I am dying
every word fights for an image
the most irrepressible state of an idea
only the desperate can help us*

When he speaks of his coming to the US after one year of recovering in Europe, Fred states even more clearly that the radical changes in his life were not unpleasant:

What helped, in fact, was the Depression. When we got here, it was very difficult to access the world of architecture.

The Depression, therefore, wasn't a drawback. It helped push him ahead.

The push received from his health problem as well as from the Depression led Fred into a personal trajectory which is described in many of the catalogues and monographs published about him. The

highlights of his early years are the time in Tucson, from 1931 into 1935, drawing, painting and teaching; the first one-man exhibition (of watercolors, Increase Robinson Gallery, Chicago, 1934); a period in Los Angeles while Frances studied in the University of Southern California; moving to Prescott, in 1935, and meeting Alfred Stieglitz in New York and Merle Armitage in Los Angeles. Through Armitage, he learned about Edward Weston, whom he visited in Santa Monica, California, in 1936. Photography was already permeating his interests; when in Europe, he had bought two cameras (a Plaubel Makina and a Zeiss Ikon, both 2¼" x 3 ¼") and learned how to process his own photographs. The meeting with Weston was decisive to involve himself more with photography.

Fred had an exhibition of his drawings, watercolors, and found objects in Hollywood, 1937, in the Howard Putzel Gallery. In 1938, a few months after Weston's and Charis Wilson's visit to Prescott (Weston was working under a Guggenheim grant), he came to an important decision: he bought a Century Universal 8" x 10", which he still has, and which is the camera used for many of his most famous images.

Charis Wilson, in "California and the West," speaks of the visit: "In Prescott we stayed five days with the Sommers (Frederick (painter and photographer), Frances, and their two eye-dropper-raised cats, Ricky (for rickets) and Micky (for rhyme)."⁵ Although he might have been in photography earlier, no image previous to 1939 had been shown and all his photographs of that time were made with the Century Universal. The newly acquired camera "provides the impetus for an outpouring of ideas. By his third box of twelve sheets of film, Sommer has made some of the images he still shows today."⁶

Some of the first prints I saw in Prescott were "traditional" photographs: the "Arizona Landscapes," the coyotes, the "Chicken Parts," the portrait of Livia. Even some of his collages and assemblages of found objects, like the magnificent "Virgin and Child with St. Anne and the Infant St. John" and "Moon

Culmination.” These are traditional in the sense that the camera and film recorded objects which were not themselves works of art. They are free from tricky procedures. They are rigorous transcriptions of the image composed on the viewing screen. But the assemblages, like the cut-papers,⁷ install a doubt: are they examples of the same thing we’re accustomed to call photography or, instead, are they reproductions of artworks created through another medium?

This is, perhaps, the first boundary that Fred’s work pushed over the territory of the other visual arts; later, with the negatives on cellophane and the drawings on smoked glass, every notion of limit between what is and what isn’t photography are completely distorted. “Paracelsus” is astonishing, a drawing on cellophane (used as negative and enlarged) whose truly sculptural quality leaves us astounded: if the “photographed” object so vivid and material, does not exist, is no more than one inch smear of brown paint on a square of cellophane—no more than the vestige of a fugitive thought—what the hell is that thing doing on the surface of a photographic paper?

. . . it is with sensitized surfaces, rather than with photography itself, that I am concerned. The sensitized surface has an honesty, an inevitableness; it can’t just do anything else. It shows the process itself.

This idea of photography understood as the art of sensitized materials, rather than the art of transcribing reality to a flat surface through the means of an optical device, seems to dominate the entirety of Fred Sommer’s work. But he approaches photography in an even less restrictive and less prejudicial way, with more amplitude, more freedom and trustfulness. Aren’t the cut-papers durable? He photographs them, applying

the preservative capacity of photography. Do the collages show too much of their contours, exposed with too much evidence of the individuality of each element? He photographs them to equalize tonalities, to soften the borderlines, deeply influencing the content through the harmonic integration of parts.

The feeling one gets from seeing and understanding Fred Sommer's photographic work is that, as suggested by Roberta Hellmann and Marvin Hoshino, he has, alone, understood the "potency of photography's automatic image-making process."

The work that Fred Sommer was to create during more than fifty years is acknowledged, today, as the work of an indisputable master, and his name holds a definitive position in the history of photography. But this acknowledgment came quite slowly: it wasn't easy for critics and historians—without mentioning the general public—to accept the ideas he expressed, or the motif implicit in his images, or the truly experimental quality impressed in everything he does.

To understand the choke reflex provoked in the average viewer by his images and ideas, one doesn't need to reflect too much. Simply, the conservative and puritan attitudes of American society of the forties couldn't understand why a serious, and well-meaning artist should photograph such disgusting things as an amputated foot, dead chicken heads and assholes, old, torn, and dirty gravures or tragically smiling, skinned coyote corpses shot by hunters; or why a landscape artist should be attracted by the boring cacti-and-stones Arizona's desert, coming at it with images of absurd geometry and scale. Finally, why a decent photographer should make photographs without using his camera, painting negatives on cellophane, painting glasses with candle smoke, making photographs of unreal things?

The uneasiness which Fred Sommer engenders doesn't stop there. And it is understandable, because he came on with more and stranger things. He designed musical scores⁸—and musicians performed it, which is even more serious; he wrote poems and essays on aesthetics—from the importance of gravity in dance to the techniques of shopping—and transformed classical texts into a peculiar reunion of apparently loose words, picked up by chance, which he calls skip-reading.

We burst out of laughter when in the somberness of the museum and monastery our throats are crowded to a flying machine, when the goals of our straits are the oscillating peacock, when in flying in tandem the immaculate spirit finds the lyre bird, then everywhere in everything are the straits of my mind, for we fraternize with a machine. (Skip-reading from Apollinaire's Zone)

Emmet Gowin told me one story that shows a too common reaction to Fred's works, the transcription of the uneasiness caused by images and ideas into a feeling of disgust against their author.

I've met Berenice Abbott in 1970. She asked me to show her my work, and we talked. She was making some suggestions in a very friendly way. I asked her if she had ever heard of Frederick Sommer. She just got very rough and very intense, and said "You know, this is a terrible person, you have to be very careful of a person like this. He's really a troublemaker." I was very surprised.

That fall Fred came to Ohio and gave a talk at the Art Institute. And I asked him if he had ever met Berenice Abbott, why did she have such a passionate anger towards him. I asked him, "Have you talk to her recently. This must be something you just did." He thought and said: "You know, this is impossible, for we only met one time, and it was in 1951. Nineteen years ago!" So, nineteen years after they had met, just once, and his attitude was so challenging and so disruptive, and he was perceived as being such a rascal, that even this many years later it was as if she had talk to him the day before.

Someone showed Charles II one of Blake's paintings, and he said: "Take this dreadful thing away, and never show it to me again!" Blake was somebody who could make images like "The Glad Day," "The Creation of Man," always thinking in terms of great harmonies. It is amazing, but I think this is the power of visual things.

In thinking about the unfavorable reactions provoked by Fred Sommer among the more conservative, its interesting to read the following statement:

. . . I don't see why they should have treated me kindly. I was entirely contrary to everything they believed in, and if I was right, they were wrong. Why should they treated me kindly? It was a question at one time, I suppose ,of their survival or mine. . . . But it is true that, still, the greatest appreciation of what we have done

comes from European countries and from the Orient rather than from our own country. Education in our country today is not even on speaking terms with culture. We are very slow to take things on that occur at home. It has always been the idea of our people that culture came from abroad, and it did, so you can't blame them for thinking so. (Frank Lloyd Wright)⁹

The difference, in Fred's case, is that he himself came from abroad, which seems to have been taken by the North Americans as an extra handicap: "the cultivated foreigner that uses his knowledge to make things impenetrable to us."

An educated person understands a slightly longer sentence, that's all. That's the only difference that education makes. And I happen to like these longer sentences at times. Why hold this against me-just because I practice being an educated person?

In May, 1994, during the International Photo Meeting in São Paulo, I asked Walter Rosenblum a question involving his impression of Fred. He answered aggressively, suggesting that Fred Sommer was someone apart from the evolution of photography. Nathan Lyons, also there, said that if Rosenblum was to give an opinion about Fred, he must know Fred's work better. The interesting thing is that in the history of photography written by Naomi Rosenblum, Walter's wife, Fred received a place of honor in the American photography, which indicates that the unawareness of his work was not the problem at all. This example, even compromised by Rosenblum's conservative

way of thinking, is worth referring to, as is Berenice Abbott's, because Rosenblum and Fred came across each other only a few times—and definitely never talk that much.

It would be easy to tell more episodes of the establishment's rejection of Fred's work. But it's enough to say that the first edition of Beaumont Newhall's *History of Photography* didn't even include his name, nor did the Time-Life Books collection on photography. The exceptional reputation reached by his work forced the mending of both faults: the Newhall's in the 1982 revised edition with the publication of *one* photograph, the Max Ernst portrait, alluding to the "surrealist influence"¹⁰ in his work.

Today, sixty-six years after leaving Brazil as a landscape architect, the respect that surrounds the name of Frederick Sommer overcomes even the alleged surrealist influence. Not only because the time has taken over the task of showing how unique and strong his work is but because, at ninety, he continues absolutely active, still producing images of astonishing quality—surpassing any attempt to classify it among the customary "isms."

His 1991 exhibition at the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, "Elective Affinities," of collages made up with lithographic prints of the human anatomy from the XIX century, and photographs of collages, was all made between 1989 and 1990. The title of the exhibition, borrowed from Goethe, perfectly suited to the techniques employed, and to the content of the images, shows that both his mind and his capacity of visual organization remain superb.

The brief text exhibited together with "Elective Affinities,"

*The structure of images
is found in the arrangement
of our minds.*

reminds me of something else he said. Taken together with it, they show us the importance of origins and sources for Fred Sommer:

We cannot do anything now that we haven't done before. So that does connect with my original education, where do I get this type of curiosity. Sometimes they ask themselves, "How did he make this synthesis here?" And, in fact, the important thing to understand about this is that there is no synthesis of something that has not been put together sometime before.

1. Coke, Van Deren, *Photography, A Facet of Modernism*, New York, Hudson Hills Press/San Francisco Museum of Art, 1986

2. Upton, John, "Frederick Sommer: Collages of Found Objects/Six Photographs with Comments by Several People, *Aperture*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 1956 (Minor White, ed.)

The English-speaking public deserves a brief explanation. *Sumaré* is not Spanish for *summation* and was very properly spelled indeed. *Sumaré* (stressed on the *é*) is a Tupi (an Indian language) word for a kind of orchid (*Cyrtopodium punctatum*); and there is a neighborhood in São Paulo and a range of mountains in Rio de Janeiro named after it. The Spanish word for *summation* is *suma*, from the verb *sumar*, in Italian there is the word *sommare*, meaning *to sum up*; but

I guess that Mr. Upton was misguided by the Medieval Latin *sommare* (same as Italian), a root for *summation*.

3. Quoted by Lanier Grahamin "The Art of Frederick Sommer," *IMAGE*, Volume 33, Nos. 3-4, Rochester, International Museum at George Eastman House, 1991.

4. “The Two Logics/Mills College, Oakland, 1983”, in *Sommer* Words*, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, 1984.

Fred seems to have followed his doctor’s advice. After cured, he perfected it by subtracting the two long walks.

5. Wilson, Charis and Weston, Edward, *California and the West*, New York, NY, Aperture Inc, 1978, p. 154.

6. Wendel, Barbara e Metzger, Charles ob. cit., p. 60.

7. After “drawing” with a knife on kraft paper, always taken from a roll, Fred hangs the result against a wall letting sections fall forward or back, allowing the piece to become three dimensional and he photographs it, with or without special lighting, more frequently without. His first cut papers date from 1962.

8. In 1934, while with Frances in California, Fred came to one of his truly original ideas. Looking at printed musical scores of some of the great composers, he was impressed by the graphic quality of the music. He found a close relation between the aural and visual aspects of musical scores: Western notation is graphic, plotting pitch in the Y axis and duration on the X axis; the visual quality of a score represents the musical quality: the better music looks better. Then, he wondered: “If those composers, aiming at nothing more than the music itself, ended up with such beautiful drawings, could I ‘draw’ musical scores? And, could they be performed?”

Fred’s musical scores, which he started drawing in 1934, are the first concrete, and most radical, demonstration of his preoccupation with “position and occupier,” a concept that not only he extends to his other art works but defines

a good part of his thoughts. If the interval between two tones is symbolized by an interval between positions in space, couldn't the performance of his drawings lead to music? If their organization is visually interesting, wouldn't the music be interesting? "It is more important to know *where* a thing is than *what* it is."

Fred's musical scores were first performed publicly at Prescott College by Walton Mendelson, flute, and Steve Aldrich, piano, in 1968.

He is still making drawings in the manner of musical notation today [1998]. A CD of the music as performed by Walton Mendelson and Stephen Aldrich is available from Nazraeli Press [1999].

9. Wright, Frank Lloyd in *The Future of Architecture*, New York, Plume Books, 1970, p. 34

10. Although the art critic is not in my field, and this is not the aim of this work, I think that is worthwhile to think about the "surrealist influence" on Fred Sommer's work. Max Ernst was the only surrealist with whom Fred was close, and it is from him that the so called influence was supposed to have come. But it is important to know that when Fred met Ernst, in 1941, Fred's foremost "surrealist" images were already done: the "Amputated Foot," the "Chicken Parts," the "Jack Rabbit," the first "Coyotes." The "Arizona Landscapes" series began in 1943, and it should be remembered that James Thrall Soby, in a book about Yves Tanguy (*Museum of Modern Art*, 1955) published one of Fred's landscapes suggesting *its* influence on Tanguy's works; Tanguy had visited Fred with Max Ernst.

There were influences, for sure; there always are, in everything and in all of us. Fred, himself, frequently comments on the importance of recognizing and respecting sources and antecedents. But the surrealist influence he received through Max Ernst shows much more in the *processes* he employed: the collages, the smoked glass and the painting on cellophane, which could have as sources the *clichés verre* and the *frottages*, and, specifically, in the technique of skipreading.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that Fred Sommer is much closer to Dadaism than to Surrealism.

On Fred Sommer: A Brief Anthology of Quotations

The legendary position he now occupies in the hierarchy of modern photographers developed slowly over a period of many years. During the 1940s and 1950s, very few people knew his name. Only a handful of photographers and museum curators responded to Sommer's unusual work. His reputation grew larger in the sixties and early seventies with his first retrospective exhibitions and major publications. During the 1980s, he became better known, thanks to a number of large exhibitions that toured cities from coast to coast. After decades of quiet isolation in Arizona, Sommer has become, to many, a mythological hero. He is now widely regarded as an elder of Surrealist photography in America, a shaman of the silver salts, an alchemist of the mercurial vapors. —Lanier Graham

Elected by his peers in recognition of his accomplishments as an artist over a period of five decades, this award for the DISTINGUISHED CAREER IN PHOTOGRAPHY for 1982 is presented to Frederick Sommer. Through his finely crafted photographs of the landscape and assemblages of found objects, through his innovative visual experimentation and through his eloquent expression of theories of aesthetic, he has enriched us with his sensitive vision. His selfless dedication to photography has established high standards for others to follow. —March 5, 1983 - Ansel Adams, Chairman;

Peter C. Bunnell, President; James Alinder,
Executive Director (The Friends of Photography)

The poetry of Fred's work is not invisible to the young people. It was young people who nominated and elected Fred to the Friends of Photography's III Award. Harry [Callahan] was the first, Aaron [Siskind] was the second.... You can see that as the sentiments of a large number of young people who came into photography through their influence. They were the most important teaching examples of quality and dedication to the work. You can add Walker Evans to them: these four people could have been thought to represent the temperament of American photography. It's quite a wide range of emotions, and yet there is something in common: the consideration of who we are in presence of culture and of nature. —Emmet Gowin

Fred Sommer gets close to American photography only in the excellence of his printmaking. Everything else - the use of the found object, the playing between photography and collage, the photograph as a means of transcription for other art objects - everything is European, or, at least, non American. —Terence Pitts

The photographs of Frederick Sommer convey a feeling of inimitable force and power that goes beyond the actual facts of the photograph. It originates in the perception and creative ability of this major American artist. —Edward Steichen

Sommer may fairly be said to represent the ideal of photographer's photographer. Neither as well known as many of the other acknowledged masters of art photography, nor as prolific, Sommer is nonetheless considered one of the very great living photographers. Working throughout the entire spectrum of photography, with an authentically surrealist sensibility, Sommer has produced a body of work which is as disturbing as it is exquisite. —ICP Encyclopedia of Photography

At a time when the experimental visual arts are inundated with the fashionable rhetoric of deconstruction, it is good to discover the classical notion of aesthetics again applied to a contemporary genre in photography. Even if that aesthetic position exists in isolated quarters, away from the mainstream of current Post-Modern discourse, its relevance and timeliness should not be underestimated in giving new insight, power, and faith to late 20th century artistic practice. Regarded by some historians and critics of photography as one of the most original minds in the field, Frederick Sommer has maintained a considerable 'underground' status over the years since his work first appeared in the pages of *Aperture* during the 1950s. —Robert C. Morgan

Photography, no less vulnerable to fashion than any other medium, hasn't quite known where to place Frederick Sommer. Judging from this show, I suspect this is because of his complexity. One of the most important bodies of photographic work produced in America in the 20th century can no longer be ignored. —James Cassel

His vision, broader and more all-encompassing than that of most other photographers, reflected his own diverse background. Besides being a landscape architect, Sommer has considerable knowledge of European art and literature and has worked as a painter himself. His exposure to surrealism came early and first-hand, giving him an advantage over others even before he met Stieglitz. Perhaps partly because of his wide-ranging interests, Sommer has been a slow and deliberate worker. —Victoria Donohoe

Aided by their rich, suggestive titles, these pictures are cross-cultural explosions. They tap a wide range of responses, from the purely visual to the purely metaphoric, stirring the viewer's memories of myth, literature and history. More than anyone else, Frederick Sommer has freed his medium from its mechanical limitations. Along with his own interior landscape, he has mapped the exterior boundaries of photography itself. —Douglas Davis

Sommer has been able to make pictures with a density of symbolic information not seen in Western art since Van Eyck, as if he alone has understood the potency of photography's automatic image-making process. —Roberta Hellman/Marvin Hoshino

With Frederick Sommer we enter the world of the incredible and somebody locks the Doors of Perception behind us. It is almost as unbelievable a world as the one in which the SS officer, who has shot down the child for refusing to go into the gas chamber 'nicely,' is hypersensitive to poor tempi in the playing of Beethoven Opus 135. The androids and mutants of Grandpere deSade ought not be surprised that the assholes of ten chickens, as photographed by Frederick Sommer, are as hieratic and decorous as a selection of engraved seals from Mesopotamia. . . . The accoutrements of his life are singularly benign—much Bach and Bruckner,

Victorian valentines, a wooden carving from a destroyed building by Louis Sullivan, a collection of sleepy cats, and a huge piece of black basalt from the West coast of Mexico, sculpted by water beyond any artifice that Jean Arp has been capable of. And yet, the photographs are ‘horrible.’ Sommer can direct his camera at a stream in the Rocky Mountains; viz., the kind they use in advertising that pure, sparkling Coor’s beer, and he can scare you to death with it. Visceral, cancerous, congealed as lava—a thousand of years of Gothic horror. And, equally, he can ask a doctor friend what he’s carrying in the bloody newspaper, insist on taking the amputated foot (from a hobo’s accident on the Santa Fe tracks) back to the darkroom, and then produce a photograph which is so accurate that it turns ‘the real’ into a veritable jungle out of Hieronymus Bosch and Max Ernst. . . . These photographs of Frederick Sommer’s should serve to remind us there is a difference between the *libertarian* and the *libertine*. They are in a fierce tradition: deSade, Restif, Maturin, Celine, Miller, Artaud, Genet. Well, the Marquis deSade’s ok, one might argue, but, would you want him to marry your sister? —Jonathan Williams

There is a quality of danger in Sommer’s work. One senses flirtation with irreversible knowledge, the kind which, in the Faustian tradition, can make it impossible to get home again. William Butler Yeats discusses the self-annihilation that is implied in poetic activity: the paradox that the poet can destroy himself if he succeeds in his own terms. There is a correlative risk for viewers as well. Sommer’s images can be simultaneously compelling and threatening. For photographer and viewers alike, these are risky waters. —David Jacobs

I saw that image, ‘AmputatedFoot’; I thought it was the single most impressive image that I had seen. It suggested levels of subject and meaning and degrees of reality that I had not felt in anything else. I remember very specifically the intuitions I had; I thought, this makes a great deal of sense, if Leonardo were

alive this is the kind of photograph that he with no doubt take, and not only that, he would be an avid supporter of photography. No other photograph ever made me think of Leonardo. —Emmet Gowin

No one seems more attuned to the epistemological implications of photography than Frederick Sommer; and no photographer, past or present, has been more diligent in making his work conform to the difficult truths that such awareness reveals. —David Jacobs

I put Fred in a position relating to Blake. Because he's not part of the mainstream—he never was and he never will be. Like Blake, he never really intended to be part of the mainstream either. There are people who know and admire and love Blake for what he has done; and to them — just like Fred to us— it's impossible to replace him. Fred is unique. —Richard Landis

Sommer is from another planet. I have never known anyone who is so visually intense, yet so emotionally detached. —Edward Steichen, quoted by Lanier Graham

Nancy and Beaumont Newhall manipulated Weston. They planned his presence and influence on art and photography. They didn't emphasize what Weston did out of his intuition and that wasn't positive enough, or good enough, according to their own puritan convictions. The Newhall's were like Methodists, they were protecting the right way. They were keeping the method clean—they were photographic Methodists. Weston met Fred, he liked what he was doing and sent him to the Newhalls and to Ansel. These people weren't able to accept his work. It was too radical for them. That's just a classic story and it represents the classic collision between the

orderly world, which the Newhalls and Ansel Adams represented, and the disorder, the disruption, represented by Fred's work. The way he was working around the concept of death was central to this collision, I think. The good Christian fears going to hell as an unwelcomed threat, just the mentioning of the name of death was unwelcomed. Fred had faced his own death and he was excited about the value of death in life. —Emmet Gowin

When Frederick Sommer wanted to draw back the curtain of media-conscious chauvinism that hung over the acceptance of photography as art and expose the ignorance and hypocrisy that dominated the art world, he said: "What is the importance of Duchamp, if not to tell us that the things that go on in painting can be done without painting." —James Enyeart

In essence, all these artists—Frank, White, Callahan, Siskind, Sommer, Rauschemberg—devoted themselves to challenging and reconstituting photography's most cherished preconceptions about the world and about representation. —Jonathan Green

There's a kind of identification with the rebel in Fred, with obscure geniuses like Vico, or Bruno, or Paracelsus, or Satie. He gets a twinkle on his eyes when he talks about being a rascal. One of the first books that he lent me was called *Crime and Rascality*. . . . —Thomas Carabasi

The Surrealist movement and his association with Max Ernst certainly affected his work but Sommer remained the inveterate renegade, never swearing allegiance to any movement. —Hunter Drohojowska

Sommer, who was raised in Brazil and trained as a landscape architect at Cornell, seems to have been an innate surrealist. —Andy Grundberg

The effect that the work of Max Ernst and other emigrant artists had on the American art scene . . . has been more concealed than revealed by American art historians. —Ulrich Bischoff

The collages by Frederick Sommer are revolutionary; with their techniques and materials, they challenge all the running concepts of painting. The departure from the traditional materials of the Expressionists and Cubists—canvas and paint, pencil and paper—and even those of Kurt Schwitters collages—theater tickets, pieces of fabric—reaches with Sommer its very top. . . . Frederick Sommer must be considered among the most important Surrealists, someone who understood the essential traces of the unconscious, recreating it in a most remarkable way. —Dieter Wyss

In the United States, the photographer who adopted the example of the Parisian surrealists with the greatest conviction and comprehension was Frederick Sommer. Directly influenced by Max Ernst, whom he met in 1941, Sommer combines an American modernist fixation with the finish of the print and a European surrealist penchant for odd juxtapositions, morbid subject matter, and the operations of chance.

Like Laughlin's, Sommer's photographs had an uneasy relation to the dominant postwar aesthetic of modernism, but they were sufficiently conventional (black-and-white, full-toned, greatly detailed, abstractionist) to be accepted into its fold. . . . The modernist aesthetic imperative of so-called straight photography, which prohibited any manipulation of the transaction between the subject and the film, obviously was less omnipotent

then than is now commonly believed. In Sommer's case, the common denominator with modernist practice was an extreme kind of print fetishism. —Andy Grundberg

When I see a magnificent print by someone like Fred Sommer, I'm torn and feel guilty about looking at one of mine. . . . —Harry Callahan

There's a relation between philosophy—one example is Spinoza, his concept of God, being not anthropomorphic, but a force, a binding force of ending universe, sort of the glue that holds everything together—and the way Fred approaches his printing. There are no concepts of good and evil, heaven and hell, superior or inferior. To avoid contrasts, to modulate. And this is shown in his approach to everything, to cooking, talking, to his love for ideas. —Thomas Carabasi

Frederick Sommer makes no concessions to the casual observer in his photographs. He packs every bit of picture space with significance of one kind or another. Consequently, a superficial glance at his pictures reveals about as much as a locked trunk of its contents. —Minor White

For Frederick Sommer a photograph brings together a long involvement with many things: with a garden of peppers; with granite rising out of jungles; with the aroma of pitanga groves; with dolphins in Guanabara Bay; with the whitest fish on the whitest platter; with the gardens of the Italian Renaissance; with the landscape as architecture and architecture as art; with Greek vase and Carolingian illuminations; with Byzantine mosaics; with Bosch, Bruegel and Piero de laFrancesca; with Irish art and the book of Kells; with Burckhardt and

Nietzsche; with Hoelderlin, Novalis and Nerval; with Poussin and Claude Lorraine; with the German romantics; with Turner and Seurat; with Cezanne, Picasso and Hercules Seghers; with Alfred Stieglitz and the conviction of the photographic image; with Oceanic art; with the art of the Northwest Coast Indians; with William Blake; with the calligraphy of Aquinas and Bach; with Japan as an aesthetic society: Daitoku-ji and Eihei-ji; with Louis Sullivan; with John Stewart and science as aesthetics; with Arizona, and with Frances. —Stephen Aldrich

When I met Fred and Frances I saw that you can devote your life to art—and somehow you can survive. —Richard Landis

. . . his library, a very fine library of art books, and philosophy and literature in German, French, Italian, represents something that is not part of the life of any other American artist that I know of. It's another world. —Emmet Gowin

He is a man engaged in enjoying a number of processes to which most of the American artists aren't paying any attention. The fact that Fred is quite introduced to the world of art and literature is the basis for his making of life itself always a rich experience; the richness of his background made him approach the different things that we can do with a broader and finer understanding of how to work with these things in ways that would enrich our lives. —Richard Landis

I think that Fred's unusually rare background, having experienced many different cultures, learned about art in general, on the evolution of painting, for instance— besides having understood the implications of

surrealism—made him able to see the poetic, symbolic, potential of the rendering of actual objects through photography. —Emmet Gowin

Fred brought the awareness of five or six languages, being born in Italy, living in Germany, bringing that heritage to Brazil, absorbing that culture, then moving to America. You can't separate someone from his personal history. —ThomasCarabasi

It isn't so much that Fred was raised in Brazil. But this must have represented a strong connection to Europe. I think of Brazil, in the Twenties, thinking of itself as an island nation belonging to Europe. There was a great influence; I saw the building where Frances and Fred lived in; it looks like a Parisian apartment building. But most important were the languages, his father's German, the Italian and the French from his mother, Portuguese... . This is a unique thing. When he went back to Europe, when he was ill, it was through these languages that he recovered elements of these cultures. He was, in miniature, the melting pot that built America.

The languages allowed him to access philosophy, art history; only Walker Evans would have probably paralleled Fred in that—but Walker knew some French, and that was it, his interests were more or less limited to the literary world. Harry and Aaron were isolated from that, they were not scholarly in their efforts. But Fred represents a connection to the scholarship of the finest traditions of philosophy and literature and poetry. —EmmetGowin

I often saw a lot of rhythm in Fred's drawings. His figures look like as they're dancing a carnival. I know Fred absorbed that—those sort of memories of Brazil are in a lot of his work. I don't know how wild he got. . . . but I know there are some strong memories. —Thomas Carabasi

Lança-perfume is too polite; bisnaga is better

Lança-perfume and *bisnaga* are names for perfume sprays used in Brazil during the *carnaval*, mostly in the old days. *Bisnaga* is kind of a rough version of *lança-perfume*; the word carries a hint of *rascality*.

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The quotations from Thomas Carabasi, Emmet Gowin, Richard Landis and Terence Pitts come from April, 1990, taped interviews, as well as both quotations of Fred Sommer himself.

The second quotation is the text of The Friends of Photography's award.

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There is a time when words fail, as in giving voice to the profound effect of Fred's life and work on me. All I can say is, "look at what I do, and how I do it." Fred would understand this. — Walton Mendelson, 1999

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