



Provisional Circuits

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In the last scene of the 1932 German film *Kuhle Wampe* or *Who Owns the World?*, written by Bertolt Brecht, a group of working- and middle-class passengers in a train engage in a heated discussion after learning that the Brazilian government had burned 11 million kilos of coffee in order to keep market prices up. The flagrant irrationality of the post-1929 world economy thus becomes symptomatic of an ideological divide, since all passengers deplore the waste but most of them nevertheless fail to recognize it as an integral part of the capitalist mode of production. However, it is precisely as one passenger turns to a nationalist rhetoric that the political bankruptcy of the nation-state vis-à-vis capitalist forces becomes dialectically evident, bringing the events across the Atlantic to shed a light on the passengers' oppressed existence within the political coordinates of their own country. In short, Brecht could still mobilize waste as a scandalous political catalyst against the complicity between national governments and capital. But what to say of the current situation, when international flows of capital are so dispersed within the everyday fabric of liberal democracies and overproduction itself is assimilated in the guise of enforced obsolescence?

The problem is not really that overproduction and waste are invisible. As a matter of fact they are actually ubiquitous, but to render them in meaningful ways is now a seemingly Herculean task. Even when they are presented as traumatic – as in apocalyptic warnings – they tend to be cynically or ideologically disavowed. As Benjamin Buchloh has argued 'any spatial relations one might still experience outside of these registers of the overproduction of objects and of electronic digitalization now appear as mere

abandoned zones, as remnant objects and leftover spaces, rather than as elementary givens from which new object relations could be configured in sculptural terms in the present.’¹ By defining his Provisional Heritage project, which took place in an abandoned factory in East London, as a series of ‘sculptural actions’, Matheus Rocha Pitta thus mobilizes a broad repertoire of media and procedures in order to address this particular deadlock. This is no mere sign of eclecticism, but the recognition of the need to engage with multiple articulations of the sensible.

Paradoxically enough, nothing in this wasteland scenario is truly wasted, just like no sculptural material arrives to the scene *ex nihilo* (like so many everyday commodities that are shipped worldwide). There are photographic registers not only of the pile of tires covering an abandoned car, but also of the empty spots these tires leave behind, signalled by indexical imprints. Sculptural action thus involves material displacements that, in this case, become visual events in themselves. The video is set in motion by the spilling of canned tomato soup and coffee drink, in a fortuitous nod to Kuhle Wampe. Like the tires, the car and a plethora of random objects, the cans were stocked in the factory, as if temporally frozen between uselessness and obliteration – the site lies right next to the 2012 Olympic Stadium and will give way to a housing redevelopment project by Ikea, that quintessential supplier of serial domesticity. The gesture of spilling the liquids is as repetitive as Andy Warhol’s claimed habit of eating Campbell’s soup for lunch on a daily basis. However, in contrast to Warhol’s mechanic cultivation of boredom, there is something rather obscene about this stash of mass-produced obsolescence. These cans are shiny and new – just like Warhol’s – and yet, their content is expired and toxic. This is brand-new waste, a token of failed circulation.

The video crucially reverses those terms so as to make failure itself circulate. In this sense, dumping those expired goods is tantamount to critically reclaiming them. The sink drains, into which they are poured, do not fulfil their usual function of taking refuse out of sight. Instead, they allow the liquids into an alternative circuit, dictated by their very material thickness (and colourful baseness). As in Robert Smithson’s flow pieces, what is crucial is what happens after the material is poured. Only that in Provisional Heritage, instead of a material enactment of entropy (which is already in play everywhere one looks), this aftermath leads to a commentary on the relay between materiality and image, and between experience and representation. The slow advance of the soup, for instance, brings small-scale debris and portions of dirty ground into attention. And all the reclaimed objects in Fountains are smeared by either soup or coffee, as if this marked their own entry into that provisional circuit. In one sequence, cans that are piled inside a TV monitor spill their contents over the panel in a striking metaphor of those relays. The registers of ‘overproduction of objects’ and ‘electronic digitalization’ are literally short-circuited in a conflict of tactile textures that uncannily evoke a bodily affect.

The sculptural in Rocha Pitta’s works is often mediated by photography and film, but takes and shots are always planned and/or staged. In this way, the artist makes an ironic reference to the aesthetics of advertising, in contrast to the point-and-shoot approach to image making he had adopted very early on in his career. This rejection of a documental *modus operandi* thus questions the regime of image and object production implicit in the practice of photography. The abandoned site is apprehended (in the cognitive sense) not as a single represented space, but by proxy, as an inventory of apprehended goods (in the legal sense – Rocha Pitta is fascinated by how the Brazilian police often displays the guns and drugs it confiscates so that they circulate as institutional propaganda in newspaper photographs). Following the clear allusion to Warhol’s serigraphs in *Hot Shots*, some of the objects in *Fountains* resemble ruined

1 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, ‘Detritus and Decrepitude: the Sculpture of Thomas Hirschhorn’, *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2001, p. 43.



versions of Rocha Pitta's references, such as Hélio Oiticica's *Bólides* or works by Donald Judd, and invite further associations by the viewers. Importantly, then, photography takes part in constituting a space not because it is able to render it realistically, but because it short-circuits memory and representation. The experience of space Rocha Pitta proposes lies precisely in this gap between the double valence of 'apprehension' and is reminiscent of Smithson's suggestion that 'to reconstruct what the eyes see in words, in an "ideal language" is a vain exploit. Why not reconstruct one's inability to see?'²

The whole project actually struck Rocha Pitta as a kind of reverse artistic residency, since, as he puts it, he went to London in order 'to deal with problems usually associated with us [Brazil]', such as economic stagnation and urban decline. His transnational foray thus blurs the symbolic borders between so-called developed and developing/underdeveloped nations and breaks with the deceptive teleology implicit in those verbal tenses, which place the former as the evolutionary destiny of the latter. In his experience, London and Rio de Janeiro unexpectedly face each other like two mirrors (it is no coincidence that both cities are facing rapid urban changes, partly motivated by the Olympic Games). The *mise en abyme* effect that this metaphor evokes is a fit reminder of how some of the best Brazilian art in the last decades has intervened in modernist and late-modernist aesthetics precisely by rejecting fixed, essential identities. A sign that cultural flows across the Atlantic – as in so many stories of wasted coffee – are a key platform for the critical reconfiguration of pressing issues in current artistic production.

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2 Robert Smithson, 'Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan', in *Robert Smithson: the Collected Writings*. Berkeley : UC Press, 1996, p. 130.