ENACTING SPATIAL MYTHOLOGIES

by Melinda Guillen

No Longer Extant is a two-person exhibition of work by LA-based artist Cayetano Ferrer and Mexico City/San Diego-based artist Adela Goldbard. The curatorial premise for the show, at its base level, is quite simple—I wanted to curate an exhibition about artists engaging with processes of structural demolition. Additionally, the curatorial framework intends to draw attention to the overlay of artistic production sited within the Structural and Materials Engineering (SME) building at UC San Diego, where the Visual Arts Gallery is located, in order to highlight shared critical inquiries into the built environment across engineering and art, rather than reinforce a division. From the outset, the $83 million Bauhaus-inspired SME building was quite the hype machine of collaboration possibilities across engineering and art. Here's a sample of some of the early rhetoric by Seth Lerer, former Dean of the Division of Arts and Humanities, "By bringing together members of the Visual Arts faculty with researchers and teachers in engineering, we call attention to the ways our creative artists are working with both traditional and innovative materials. In many ways, our Visual Arts department is a group of materials engineers. Our sculptors, our painters, our digital artists and our social theorists all work together to understand the place of engineered materials in culture and the imagination."[1] Now three years later, those collaborations have yet to materialize.

I must admit that I've grown increasingly concerned and frustrated with the baitand-switch of such interdisciplinary approaches that, in practice, actually prioritize the interests and goals of engineering over art and produce the myth of collaboration. Of this tension, I turn to Australian artist, writer and curator and a longstanding presence in the evolution of video and computer technologies, Stephen Jones' assertion, "Within some context the engineer develops the existing capabilities of a technology. These capabilities may stimulate the artist to utilize that technology for some process, which suits their context and intentions, but the technology will be, almost necessarily, inadequate to the artist's intentions… Even

[1] This is from the press release for the SME building's opening reception. It can be accessed here: jacobsschool.ucsd.edu/news/news_releases/release.sfe?id=1254

if it does not actually produce a collaboration, the needs of the artist can stimulate an engineer to extend the technology in some way thus extending the possibilities of its use, and thereby extending the range of the works that the artist might produce with that technology. Thus technology and art can co-evolve in a configuration of mutual interdependence driven by the feedback each supplies to the other, which is a cybernetic process, whether there is an active collaboration taking place or not."[2] I underscore that such co-evolutionary qualities have always existed, to some degree, and that it is only the competitive logic and drive of deterministic capitalism that suggests and therefore, creates a sustained division, or false dichotomy, where it does not actually exist. This isn't to suggest that engineering, art or even, say, culinary production do not all possess real differences but that, instead, any shared methodological interest and co-evolutionary qualities are undermined and stratified within the larger structural logic of a valued hierarchy.

For me, I saw a connection between Cayetano Ferrer and Adela Goldbard's work in their nuanced critical capacities. I was interested in how both artists present distinct engagements that challenge the mythologies of their particular locations of inquiry, while maintaining a conceptual rigor and expansive research methodology in their work. In short, they both demonstrate the co-evolutionary qualities of art with other realms of technological production including but not limited to architecture, geology, film and history. Where Ferrer's work deconstructs the reductive mythology of Las Vegas by way employing its own methods of spectacle, Goldbard's video works centralize myth in the visual language of film. Additionally, Goldbard works closely with other specialists in the production of her work including architects, pyrotechnicians, cinematographers and others.

In Lobo (2013) and ATM (2014), Goldbard takes the recurring explosions throughout Mexico and amplifies their suspicious nature by means of material play in theatrical productions. In Lobo, a Ford Lobo pick-up truck—which is commonly used by narcos (drug dealers) of Mexican drug cartels—made of reed board slowly drives into the frame, surrounded by the blackness of night with subtle light cast on the greenery in the

[2] Stephen Jones, "A Cultural Systems Approach to Collaboration in Art and Technology," in Systems, ed. Edward A. Shanken (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 146.

foreground. The sound is quiet—only the natural static buzzes and nondescript passing noise of the outdoors can be heard—which adds to the anticipation following the movement of the truck. Upon entering the center of the frame, the Lobo triggers a detonation of explosives; two successive blasts engulf the vehicle in a cloud of white smoke with radiating sparkling streams of fireworks. The single shot, 4k-video captures even the finest particles of the wreckage as they drift through the air to the crackling sound of debris. In ATM, Goldbard employs a similar strategy of pyrotechnic explosion but this time, of an ATM made of cardboard. Unlike Lobo, the ephemeral structure is stationed in the center of the frame and occupies most its space. After the ATM explodes, you see a swaying cascade of money, smoke and fire. Admittedly, it is difficult to not take pleasure in watching dollar bills set aflame.

Both works are re-stagings of previously reported explosions throughout Mexico. As the stories make the news, it is often unclear whether they are the result of the Mexican government or the larger network of gangs and drug cartels. Each incident is endemic to Mexico's steady increase of political corruption, disparity and violence and these conditions are not at all detached from the ferocity of globalized economies of exploitation. Combining filmic technical precision, special effects with meticulously planned detonation, Goldbard fictionalizes each event to reveal their highly constructed and deceptive nature.

On a different register, Cayetano Ferrer also deconstructs dominant narratives. His practice incorporates technological developments in video, projection mapping, and lighting software applications, within the logic of sculpture. Casino Model 3 (2010) is a speculative proposal for a Las Vegas casino that centers on a relationship between the geography and cultural history of the city's surrounding valley. The installation consists of a looped projected-video fa.ade on the exterior, displaying footage in chronological order of other casino demolitions from 1993–2007. Intended for the former site of the Frontier Hotel & Casino, the casino incorporates the history of the Frontier as a landmark and its thematic connection to the waning frontier of the American West. The dye-sublimated floor carpet in the installation's interior mirrors the patterns of conventional casino carpeting in its vivid coloring, while also doubling as a map of the topographical faultlines just outside of the

area where atomic testing was first brought to Nevada in the early 1950's. The ceiling projection of moving, grey storm clouds, references the temporal dissonance of being inside casino spaces. Ferrer pairs the spectacle of planned implosions in Las Vegas on the exterior to the subversive strategies that generated a level of public complicity in the effort to bring atomic testing to Nevada on the interior. The clandestine tactics operated covertly as visual signifiers such as the Miss Atomic beauty pageants that re-packaged the mushroom cloud form into an accessible and gendered (i.e. non-threatening) symbol, disassociated from its actual function. Consequently, the Nevada Test Site (NTS) was built north of Las Vegas and its nuclear testing program caused significant damage to the site's multiple indigenous, ecological systems, forever shifting the topography of the area.

In a broader cultural context, the 1972 book by architects Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, Learning from Las Vegas, continues to be one of the only cited sources on the architectural and cultural merits of the city. The study intended to open up architectural discourse, away from its own desire to erect monuments as patriotic symbols and toward an understanding of the tastes of "common people." From the outset, Learning From Las Vegas placed the city within a system of valuation on the opposite end of "high culture." As detailed in the study, "Finally, learning from popular culture does not remove the architect from his or her status in high culture. But it may alter high culture to make it more sympathetic to current needs and issues."[3] Such an approach merely appeals to an existing measure of cultural worth and does not critically examine the formation or purpose of such value systems. What Learning from Las Vegas and its continued re-circulation in contemporary art, urban planning and architectural discourse fails to accomplish is to demonstrate the complex web of forces or co-evolutionary qualities that bring cities like Las Vegas into being. It forgets the built aspect of built environments and instead, singles the city out as a self-contained and curious, at best, system of its own. Whereas, Ferrer employs a type of epistemological critique of dominant perceptions of Las Vegas and its historical relationship to military industrialization. Together, all elements of the work

[3] Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, "Theory of Ugly and Ordinary and Related and Contrary Theories," in Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 161.

reveal multiple layers of power, privatization and profit beneath the spectacular veneer of the neon valley. Casino Model 3 allows you to inhabit a space of architectural artifice through recognizable aesthetic signifiers in order to recover some of the lost history of Nevada.

As a discursive element to the exhibition, I screened films by or about four artists that in many ways operate as loose art historical precedents to the work in the show. The program began with Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta. Her short and silent films present her poetic, mystical and ephemeral engagement with landscapes and structures. Many of them are documentation of her well-known series, Silueta, performances that took place between her travels from Iowa to Mexico, primarily from 1973-1977. Past Future Split Attention by American artist, Dan Graham is documentation of a performance at London's Lisson Gallery in 1972 in which two performers that knew one another were recorded in the same space. One performer stated what the other performer has just done and the second performer stated what the first performer was about to do. The Dan Graham performance revealed the psychosocial and temporal elements of sharing a space among others, their own subjectivities and yours, in a perpetual sense of the present. The third film was by Gordon Matta-Clark, trained as an architect, his work has been described as "architectural accidents" that reveal the close structural relationship between art and architecture. When a building is evacuated of its primary function, it becomes art. That polemic motivated Matta-Clark's work and Splitting from 1974, in which the artist made actual cuts into a building on Humphrey Street in Englewood, New Jersey—continues to be an example of the productive overlap across such fields. Lastly, the 2004 documentary film Sheds by Jane Crawford and Robert Fiore is focused on the construction of Robert Smithson's Partially Buried Woodshed (1970) on the grounds of Kent State University. The piece was built just before the May 4th shootings at Kent State, which left 4 students protestors dead and others injured at the hands of excessive force by the Ohio National Guard. Smithson's sculpture took on another layer of relevance after the incident; it became a sort of a monument of decay mirroring the stark political divisions of the Vietnam War era. The entropic remains of the shed is now engulfed by plants and surrounded by a football field, parking lot and the

new Liquid Crystal Materials Science building; a nice irony that I think Smithson would have enjoyed.

Back in our own Structural and Materials Engineering building, the Visual Arts Gallery has always been somewhat of a challenge to show work because it is the result of some odd calculation of space distribution consisting of uneven white walls, interior glass panels from floor to ceiling and an elongated floor plan with bizarre angles and no truly parallel walls.[4] However, it was ideal for this exhibition. Upon entering the gallery, visitors were immediately confronted by Goldbard's sculptural prototype of a model house, Architectural Prototype for an Upcoming Disaster (2015)—a nearly 6ft cubed house made of 5000 scaled down artisanal bricks, lit softly from within the structure, as a house is normally. Across the gallery, stood the 11ft tall mapped projection of Ferrer's casino fa.ade, displaying glittering layers of dissolving hotels and casinos. Along the narrow stretch of the gallery's center, Goldbard's Lobo and ATM videos were projected in HD, facing one another on opposing walls. Echoing through the gallery, one could hear the sound of explosions and the crackling of fire from Goldbard's work. Though, such noises were also easy to conflate with the silent projection of Ferrer, creating a layer of sensory disorientation. The two contrasting architectural elements—Casino Model 3 and Architectural Prototype…—flanking the exhibition was my favorite element. On one end, a towering box with angled walls of mapped projections and the other end, a small model home and yet both deceptive in terms of density and scale—one, a relatively simple construction of drywall and lumber and the other, made of 5000 mini bricks that actually weighs almost two tons.

Considered together, the exhibition, screening series and this publication, only nominally point to the political, social, ecological, and temporal conditions of the built environment that operate in a cycle of creation, expansion, and destruction. Though the term "no longer extant" is typically encountered in research databases and archives to demarcate that an

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[4] For such a highly engineered and costly project, it's funny that the gallery space not only has such odd features as those listed above but it also does not meet basic museum display standards of art objects, as my colleague and fellow Ph.D. in art history Elizabeth D. Miller and I were told by a librarian from UCSD's Special Collections when we inquired about showing items from the Jackson Mac Low Papers / Fluxus archive. How's that for form and function?

artwork, document or structure is believed to no longer exist, I hope what remains after this project is an ongoing consideration of the co-evolutionary qualities of artistic contributions to the built environment. Or at the very least, a desire to blow shit up.