

## ELSEWHERE

“Our notion of Elsewhere refers to the mass media ‘take’ that major disasters, either natural or man-made, only seem to happen in other places outside capitalist urban centers, never at home.”<sup>1</sup>

—Todd Ayoung

‘Home,’ for Trinidadian and Colombian-born artists Todd Ayoung and Carlos Andrade, is, geographically at least, New York—a place that so recently witnessed disaster on a large scale. When experiencing *Elsewhere*, produced shortly after September 2001, it might be tempting for audiences to relate the meaning of the work to this specific, catastrophic event. To do this, however, would be to ignore the artists’ longstanding and complex investigation of the definitions of disaster, as well as the relationship between ecological concerns and global politics.

In this installation, Andrade and Ayoung’s work acts as a metaphor for other locations where natural or man-made disasters take place but are most often viewed through the filter of the mass media. Andrade and Ayoung are interested in the resulting psychological distance—and consequently lack of real impact—that Daniele Archibugi describes: “In 1994, for example, half a million people were killed in just a few weeks in Rwanda, yet nothing changed in international politics. In 1995, 8,000 people were killed in a single day in Srebrenica [Bosnia] alone, but the effects of the tragedy were only felt at the regional level.”<sup>2</sup>

The events of September 2001 obviously caused a shift—both geographically and psychologically—in an American experience of disaster. Still, Andrade and Ayoung continue working with wider concerns: whether the underlying causes of disasters are natural or man-made; what sense of responsibility we feel toward places that are “elsewhere”; what role the mass media plays in disseminating and filtering images; and how we choose to locate ourselves culturally, socially, and politically as a result of these considerations.

In *Elsewhere*, a series of 14 boxes with small houses on top are installed through the gallery space like the discs of a human backbone, linked together with metal conduits that spill out onto the floor (figs. 7 & front cover). This is a body that has been blown to bits: if tossed in space, the discs would revolve like a tornado, just like Dorothy Gale’s home in *The Wizard of Oz*. Smoke is kept low in the gallery by a fan near the ceiling, creating a sense of disaster and recent aftermath. Inside the boxes are melted objects—mostly toys from China and Colombia—that can be viewed from below: mini-meltdowns that act as commentaries on the cheap labor that underpins global trading patterns (fig. 8).

In form and content, *Elsewhere* is an extension and adaptation of the exhibition, *What Is Left Over* (figs. 1–5).<sup>3</sup> Originally shown in Denmark, *What Is Left Over* comprised three interrelated installations, the first two of which referred to the dramatic aftereffects of an earthquake. *Night of the World* took the form of a fallen “body” of prosthetic parts, an earthquake victim covered in Colombian-manufactured reproductions of ice bags (fig. 3). By moving through the space, viewers triggered *Substance Is Subject*, a slide-projected image of a collapsing building (fig. 4). In contrast to the visceral image of the body, the projection conjured up references to Hollywood disaster movies with their towering infernos, or apocalyptic scenes that were always watched from a safe distance. With its original ten, rather than 14, boxes and houses called *Untitled Commandments*, the third part of the installation bore the closest resemblance to *Elsewhere* (fig. 2).

In this new piece, Andrade and Ayoung have taken the essence of *What Is Left Over* and abstracted it further; the body and ice bags are gone, as are recognizable forms of buildings. Although the artists use black-and-white images from the World Trade Center disaster, these are highly pixelated copies, abstracted to the point that their original source is no longer recognizable. Ayoung and Andrade’s choice

of more abstract imagery is part of their ongoing critique of the way in which the mass media selects, dramatizes, and repeats images to the point that the senses are saturated, even anesthetized, by the experience. As Andrade also points out, the same events may be presented differently in other locations in the world—spanning a range of graphically real to highly filtered images. Jean Baudrillard emphasizes the implicit dangers of being a passive recipient: “The role of images is highly ambiguous. For they capture the event (take it as hostage) at the same time as they glorify it. They can be infinitely multiplied, and at the same time act as a diversion and neutralization....The image consumes the event, that is, it absorbs the latter and gives it back as consumer goods.”<sup>4</sup>

Andrade and Ayoung argue that the way in which we consume these images has a profound bearing on our views of the past, as well as of history in the making. Ayoung has worked around these concerns since the 1980s with other individual artists, as well as with groups such as the New York-based REPO-History and Godzilla. His interest in the mediated image, disaster, and terrorism was clearly evident in his one-person Copenhagen show in 1986, *In the Eye*, as well as in the more recent *Suspect Series* (1999). Here, computer-altered images of natural disasters showed aerial views of destroyed houses and human figures under surveillance, framed by a red target circle. Such subjects necessarily become more complex in an age in which we ourselves increasingly become the creators, mediators, and distributors of images. As Herman Asselberghs noted, this forces a shift in the relationship between the viewer and the media: “Now that reality TV has made its appearance, the gap between the viewer and the screen has been narrowed further. The man-with-the-camcorder (he is on the set instead of in front of it) serves up his world as a permanent disaster area in which he and his family play the main parts themselves. A catastrophe will not make anyone bat an eyelid, after all there is a big chance that the TV viewer has filmed (and caused) it himself.”<sup>5</sup>

Andrade and Ayoung deliberately avoid presenting man-made and natural disasters as visually different. This raises a number of questions. To what degree might an apparently natural disaster (such as an earthquake or hurricane) also be man-made? Is it possible to tell whether a disaster is the result of organized or random action, and how do the perceptions of it differ?

The home of unabomber, Theodore Kaczynski, is used symbolically by Andrade and Ayoung in both *What Is Left Over* and *Elsewhere*. Kaczynski’s simple Montana cabin, without electricity, plumbing, or telephone, provided the model for the tiny houses that are placed on each box (figs. 5–7, & front cover). The one window that simultaneously offered Kaczynski minimal light and restricted views from outside in has gone—but the insides of the boxes fester with stuff, much the way the unabomber’s cabin hosted accumulations of objects and papers (fig. 8). In a sense, Kaczynski is a symbol of what is man-made and natural, a combination of organized and arbitrary behavior—selecting apparently random victims while being driven by his own idiosyncratic manifesto that vilified technology as something that “repeatedly forces freedom to take a step back.”<sup>6</sup> In *Elsewhere*, Andrade and Ayoung’s references to technology, nature, culture, and commerce comment more on the way in which natural disasters (global warming being a prime example) are exacerbated, if not caused, by man-made, economically driven interests. Ayoung and Andrade look for signs that lead up to a disaster, but that are often overlooked because of individual or collective inertia. In this respect, the influence of the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek on the artists is considerable—particularly the notion of the *Denkverbot*: feeling forbidden to think or act in a way that might upset the prevailing order, whatever form that order might take.<sup>7</sup>

In *Elsewhere*, our role as viewer, and participant, is key to the experience. As we move around the space, our presence triggers two slide-projected images of clouds

that wrap around the houses like Rorschach inkblots (figs. 7 & front cover). Ayoung and Andrade play on our tendency to see things in otherwise innocuous imagery—such as evil faces in clouds—and to ascribe religious or superstitious, connotations to events (back cover). Whether we cite the prophecies of Nostradamus or acts of God (ironically implied in the title *Untitled Commandments*) — these exemplify a preference to relinquish responsibility for the causes of events to a higher order.

In a strange way, elsewhere is also presented as a place of fantasy or escape that draws on the power of the cinematic image. Salman Rushdie, in his text on *The Wizard of Oz*, comments: “What she expresses here, what she [Dorothy] embodies with the purity of an archetype, is the human dream of *leaving*, a dream at least as powerful as its countervailing dream of roots.... It is a celebration of Escape, a grand paean to the Uprooted Self, a hymn *the* hymn to Elsewhere.”<sup>8</sup> Rushdie considered that in the film, “...the imagined world became the actual world...the real secret of the ruby slippers is not that ‘there’s no place like home,’ but rather that there is no longer any such place as home...which is anywhere, and everywhere, except the place from which we began.”<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, Ayoung’s temporary foray into what he termed “imaginary landscape” paintings of the early 1990s, represented “a kind of idealism, a Utopia...a nostalgia for a place that does not exist”: “Home” and “Elsewhere” become deeper cultural signifiers.<sup>10</sup> In *Travel Poster Series* (2002), light boxes (devices often used by Andrade in his own work to contain collages of images and objects) promote the destinations of Colombia, Iran, Israel, and Somalia (fig. 9). These are also a take on Jean-Luc Godard’s film *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle* (*Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, 1967). Here, a young Parisian wife, resorting to prostitution to obtain the material goods she desires, is often seen against the background of travel posters advertising faraway, exotic places. Reports on the Vietnam War filter through the film, providing an alternative and extremely violent image of elsewhere that gives a real edge to the film’s social and cultural significance. Intriguingly, when speaking about his film more than 30 years ago, Godard emphasized the film’s intention to describe modern life, which, rather like this installation, was less about what newspapers and the media had to say about technology or business than about “observing mutations.”<sup>11</sup>

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New York City  
February 2002

Notes:

1. Todd Ayoung, correspondence with author, October 2001
2. Daniele Archibugi, “Terrorism and Cosmopolitanism,” in *After Sept. 11: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*, on Social Science Research Council site. (<http://www.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/archibugi.htm>).
3. Carlos Andrade and Todd Ayoung, *What Is Left Over*, exhibition, North-Udstillingssted Gallery, Copenhagen, Denmark, Oct. 6–Nov. 4, 2000
4. Jean Baudrillard, “The Spirit of Terrorism,” *Le Monde*, Nov. 2, 2001, translated by Dr. Rachel Bloul, ([http://awake.sparklehouse.com/downloads/papers/naud\\_terr.html](http://awake.sparklehouse.com/downloads/papers/naud_terr.html)), Nov. 14, 2001.
5. Herman Asselberghs, “Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Texas anymore...we must be over the rainbow!,” *New Observations*, Summer 1999, no.122, 30–33.
6. Theodore J. Kaczynski, “Manifesto,” no. 129, *The Washington Post*, Sept. 19, 1995.
7. Bettie-Sue Hertz, “Meltdown! An Essay on *What Is Left Over* by Carlos Andrade and Todd Ayoung,” *Art Bulletin*, forthcoming. Hertz discusses the artists’ use of Slavoj Zizek’s phrase “What is left over” from Zizek’s *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 50.
8. Salman Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz* (*BFI Film Classics*), (London: British Film Institute, 1992), 23.
9. *Ibid.*, 57.
10. Simon Taylor, “Todd Ayoung: Decolonizing the Mind,” *Third Text*, no. 30, Spring 1995, 57.

11. Jean-Luc Godard, *L'Avant-Scène du Cinéma*, May 1967,  
(<http://www.bfi.org.uk/collections/release/2or3/godardon.html>).

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The artists thank Anne Barlow, Carly Berwick, Megan Pugh, Curlee Raven Holton, Robert S. Mattison, Michiko Okaya, Allison Quensen Blatt, and Stevie O. Daniels.

Williams Center for the Arts Director: Ellis Finger  
Williams Center Gallery Director: Michiko Okaya  
[www.lafayette.edu](http://www.lafayette.edu)

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Back cover: Kelly Price, detail of smoke and dust cloud from photograph of the collapse of World Trade Center buildings, New York, N.Y., September 11, 2001, © Reuters/Kelly Price.

Publication design: Michiko Okaya

College Editor: Stevie O. Daniels

Williams Center Editor: Allison Quensen Blatt

Printer: Harmony Press, Easton, Pa.

The gallery program is presented under provisions of the Frederick Knecht Detwiler Endowment.

The exhibition series is funded in part through a grant from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts—a state agency funded by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.

