

Meltdown! What Is Left Over by Carlos Andrade and Todd Ayoung.

Betti-Sue Hertz

On September 11, 2001 the images of the attack on the World Trade Center instantly joined the ranks of photos and footage of visually impressive catastrophes that circulate globally. Still and moving pictures broadcast in real time around the world showed the dance of morbid deathly beauty set against the blue sky, with the slow-motion plane piercing and exploding in the upper reaches of the second tower. This image is only slightly less perfect than the emblematic pictures of the cloud formations sent up by the atom bombs after they were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. For those of us living in the United States, the assault on the towers, a monumental architectural achievement of capitalism, has had a chilling effect on the scale of a major war or natural disaster. This view and the ones that followed—the collapse of the towers and other nearby buildings, and the rescue efforts of heroic disaster workers—are now seared into our collective memory. The senseless toppling of buildings and the loss of human lives in overwhelming numbers have struck home. Our proximity to these horrific events has hopefully brought us closer to a thoughtful understanding of the uncontrollable nature of other tragedies.

Almost a full year before the events of September 11, Carlos Andrade and Todd Ayoung created a three-part multimedia piece that uses natural disasters as a metaphor for the interpenetration of nature and culture. The project was shown at Northudstillssted, an exhibition space in Copenhagen.¹ It features sculptural installations, slide projections, and blinking lights. The artists relied on images of historic events to explore the tenuous relationship between beauty, destruction, and humanity in a media-saturated society. The source photographs are a jumping-off point for their strategies of intervention, and the pair's renditions of media images are direct and physical. *What Is Left Over* (2000) reveals the contradictory status of the media's interception of the unfolding of horrific events by endlessly reproducible visual means. As images flow from a site of terror, disaster, or misfortune onto the Internet, radio, television, and into print, the global audience receives instant yet removed contact with the scene of the event and its aftermath. The translation from incident to document takes place in such a short time that the memory of it cannot even form within those who have been witnesses before the image is broadcast to distant locations. The reportage reveals the attraction for these "brought to you by . . . you are lucky if you are not here" transmissions that replace the solid experience with mediated imagery, and the traumatic nature of the situation with distancing mechanisms of immediate analysis and exhaustive repetition. Instant streaming pictures collapse the space between distance and proximity, but also place viewers in the safety of virtual space. Through the manipulation and/or repetition of video footage or still photography, the "original document" is reshaped to compete in the overproductive field of consumable images. Since it is difficult to digest destruction—twisted rubble, splatters of blood, or cold corpses—before the next equally horrific event unfolds before our eyes, the distancing techniques of corporate media machines act to temper these harsh realities with graphics, music, or other entertaining distractions.

Although Andrade and Ayoung focus on the effects of natural disasters, which are typically perceived as being politically neutral, the source photographs that they mine resemble pictures of war. For example, if the image for part one of the works, *Night of the World*—a shot of a group of people wearing medical masks looking at corpses covered by a mound of bags of ice—had a

different caption it could easily be read as a photograph of war dead instead of earthquake victims. The most recent trend of artfully designed and neutralizing instant replays of *The Tragic* is now in full bloom. It was initiated with the handling of the representation of the Persian Gulf War, a conflict that was conducted before the eyes of a global television audience. The photographs of stealth bombers and Hawk surface-to-air missiles in the night sky over Baghdad on January 16, 1991, circulated by the Grazia Neri news agency were no less than elegant, enticing audiences with an aestheticized treatment of war. What was almost totally blocked from public consumption at the time were the views of twisted and burnt bodies of people in the desert caught in fires, often flanked by oil tanks or dredges. Abbas, a Magnum photographer who was born in Iran, was one of the few who depicted the war from a humanist perspective. Breaking with the censorious demands of the press corps during Operation Desert Storm, he photographed burnt corpses of Iraqi soldiers, producing pictures such as *Soldier on the Basra Road* (1991). Abbas and other photojournalists such as Kenneth Jarecke, who also dared to record the charred bodies, were eventually able to circulate the very types of images that the United States government wanted to suppress.²

Andrade and Ayoung's aim in using these images of destruction is to reshape our relationship with the profound significance of the absolute terror of catastrophe. Although they concentrate primarily on natural disasters or disasters triggered by the unbalancing of natural forces, they do not differentiate between the natural or cultural causes that may have disrupted an ecological system. Benign versions of the constant ecological juggling act such as population density or overtly evil acts like the discharge of toxic materials into the atmosphere can contribute to an explosive moment of a seemingly irrational nature. Two parts of *What is Left Over* focus on massive earthquakes (Armenia, Colombia, in 1999; and Mexico City in 1985), which are generally categorized as acts of God, where blame is suspended. The cause of the confusion and despair associated with these disasters is accepted within a cosmology of humanity's fate. The third component of the piece evokes the chaos wrought by a single deranged individual, the *Unabomber*, Theodore Kaczynski. It is comprised of a series of house forms based on the simple cottage in rural Montana where he lived. This component problematizes the other two, as it questions the randomness of the natural when considered within the realm of culturally instigated tragedies.

Night of the World features pieces of prosthetic body parts, which can be glimpsed protruding from underneath a mound of large ice bags. The labeling on the bags (which were made in Colombia, simulate the ice bags actually used to preserve corpses of earthquake victims, and were sold at the show) includes the phrase, "What Is Left Over" positioned below a color image of a sacred heart, a popular icon in Colombia. The title comes from a passage in Slavoj Žižek's *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* about "the Monstrous of a spontaneity not yet bound by any Law . . ."³ The melting, burning, sacred heart sits safely upon the simulation of machine-produced ice cold and numbing. This image may serve as a signifier for the center of the earth and its antipodes, the Arctic and Antarctic poles, placing body and earth within the same metaphoric field. A simulated human body succumbs to rigor mortis underneath the weight of hard water. Can the heart melt the ice? Could love have transformed it into a sea of water, which would have surrounded and protected the human body? In the installation lights flicker, signaling danger and the incompatibility of colliding opposites—fire and ice change material shape. Meltdown.

In *Substance is Subject*, the gallery viewer becomes a participant/ observer, a position that challenges the distancing effects of mainstream media's representation of tragedy. Articles are attached to the wall: a plastic human sized hand which lights up with an image of the sacred heart; a crumbled piece of paper that is the press release from the exhibition; a light green hospital bed sheet; and a piece of sheet-rock. These banal yet suggestive objects in the real space of the gallery take on another kind of life when a projection (which is triggered by the entering visitor, as though he or she has caused the transformation of the objects' symbolic location) of a photograph appears on the wall. It features a flattened "pancaked" hospital building with the space between the floors totally collapsed, a product of the Mexico City earthquake. Human bodies and everything else have been squished between compacted layers of concrete. As in *Night of the World*, only glimpses of the human body are visible. This is not a grotesque and twisted horror, but a known horror that elicits empathy with the overwhelming loss implied by the photograph—human life, architectural structures, the city itself. The viewer is implicated as the projection is triggered by his or her entry. The uncontrollability of the disaster is reassessed because the viewer is caught in the scene, in a crime, in the fate of humanity itself.

Untitled Commandments shifts the perpetrator of destruction from the illusive processes of nature to the act of a single person, the Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski, who sent bombs with cryptic messages to random victims. From 1978 to 1995 he injured or killed people who he found to be threatening such as Gilbert Murray, a timber-industry lobbyist as well as scientists, military people and government workers. Mysterious and unknown to his victims, the government, and the press, until revealed to them by his brother, Kaczynski functioned outside of the norm and created fear and confusion for a society which assumes itself civilized. He is often portrayed as chaos lodged inside the human psyche. The media construction of the Unabomber took on the mythic proportions of the Monstrous and Demonic. He is represented by a model of his house, a simple frame structure with a peak roof, which is repeated in ten one foot square units. Melted remains of plastic toys from China and Colombia which now look more like vomit than anything cute and brightly colored that would attract a child cover the ripped open underside of each house. The choice of these objects seems unrelated to the case of Kaczynski. Here, the artists have inserted another issue, another meltdown: the dizzying rate of circulation of goods and images between the US and the Third World, which provides viewers with another "hot" link to the earthquake components of the show.

Taken together *What Is Left Over* creates a stir in the imagination of the viewer, and possibly terror at the uncontrollability of nature. Andrade and Ayoung trigger feelings of helplessness in the face of monstrous nature without succumbing to the sensationalism that dominates representations of actual events. When confronted with massive natural disasters our own feelings of inadequacy are almost inevitable. Although it is within society's reach politically, socially and ecologically, to lessen its negative effects on human lives and the built environment, it is daunting.

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Notes

1. This article was written on the occasion of Andrade and Ayoung's exhibition at North-Udstillingssted Gallery, Copenhagen, Denmark, which ran from October 6–November 4, 2000. The website for the exhibition is www.north-udstillingssted.dk. The article was originally published in *Art Journal* Vol 61, No1, Spring 2002.
2. For a further discussion of this subject, see Neil Leach, *The Anaesthetics of Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 22–25.
3. Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London, Verso, 1999), 50.

Captions

1. Carlos Andrade and Todd Ayoung. *What is Left Over*, 2000. Plastic bag (made in Colombia), mannequin hand, CD/catalogue, medical and religious objects. 8 x 26 x 12 in. (20 x 65 x 30 cm.) Courtesy of the artists.
2. Carlos Andrade and Todd Ayoung. *Untitled Commandments*, 2000. Installation. Sheetrock, wood, melted plastic toys. 3 x 10 x 10 in. (8 x 26 x 26 cm.) Courtesy of the artists.
3. Carlos Andrade and Todd Ayoung. *Untitled Commandments*, 2000. Installation detail.
4. Carlos Andrade and Todd Ayoung. *Untitled Commandments*, 2000. Installation detail.
5. Carlos Andrade and Todd Ayoung. *Night of the World*, 2000. Artist designed ice bags, green sheet, mannequin body parts, fluorescent lights, and plastic conduit. 16 x 60 x 71 in. (40 x 150 x 180 cm.) Courtesy of the artists.
6. Carlos Andrade and Todd Ayoung. *Night of the World*, 2000. Detail.
7. Carlos Andrade and Todd Ayoung. *Substance as Subject*, 2000. Mannequin hand, sheetrock, press release, crumpled image of Christ, plastic conduit, and viewer activated slide projector. 8 x 256 x 236 in. (20 x 650 x 600 cm.) Courtesy of the artists.

