

VOID¹

A generation of Americans first contemplated a large-scale loss of national identity when Taylor (Charlton Heston) discovered the partially buried Statue of Liberty in the 1968 film, *The Planet of the Apes*. The literalization of spectacular destruction, real and symbolic, has not paled the memory of regret that laced Taylor's enraged realization that his was only a temporal, not a geographical dislocation. It is this grasp of complicity, undeniable by time and/or distance, that the current US administration has endeavored to erase from national consciousness, and that artists have invariably tried to illuminate. Although we are not given details on the exact causes that lead to the dramatic conclusion of *The Planet of the Apes*, the forces of war, technology, and unthinking greed linger in the Biblical landscape of the forbidden zone to be uncovered in numerous sequels.

Like the subsequent rummaging through iconic and everyday cultural ruins that occurs in these and other sci-fi, disaster, and zombie films of the late 60s and 70s, collaborating artists Carlos Andrade and Todd Ayoung take us through excavating processes to discover the inattentiveness of our processing of disaster, both natural and human-made, near and elsewhere. Their conflation of distant trauma and destruction "at home" lead to a questioning of the causal relationships that link them not only in the visual, but also in the economic, ecological, and political fields. Previous works by Andrade and Ayoung reveal "...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..."²

¹ "The title "VOID" comes from the artists' readings of Slavoj Žižek, such as his idea 'the nation,' for example, as if it has some deep meaning that one can hold onto, only to find out that when one stops to gaze at the nation/thing--there is nothing to see." Todd Ayoung, email correspondence, September 2004.

² Betti-Sue Hertz, "Meltdown! *What is Left Over* by Carlos Andrade and Todd Ayoung," *Art Journal*, Vol. 61, no. 1, spring 2002: 27.

Through documents like the Zapruder film, the Rodney King video, (and more recently the Abu Ghraib prisoner torture photographs), we have seen evidence that various interpretations of the same images can be extrapolated, even more so with the aid of enhancement, effects, added soundtracks, text, and news logos. "Exhaustive repetition and immediate analysis,"³ is a tested method of distancing trauma. Andrade and Ayoung deploy related means to achieve the opposite result. Acknowledging the impermanence and instability of virtual news images, they select and introduce composites of events, however temporally and geographically disparate, within a framework of global opposition and exploitation, to raise questions about what is within and outside of our control.

Central to their problematizing of notions of culpability is the insertion of figures such as Theodore Kaczynski (the Unabomber) into tableaux of presumably random, politically neutral "acts of God"--earthquakes and other natural disasters. The structure of Kaczynski's rural Montana home is rendered in numerous sculptural forms (for example, *Shacks* 2003), stuffed with molded, melted objects such as mass-produced plastic toys. This unmonumental detritus (not unlike Taylor's talking doll) takes on larger significance in light of the artists' combination of these confusing masses with a proliferation of other vastly circulating images (of war, terror, or disaster). Means of transmission, trade, labor, and exchange are called into question by a leveling of formats. For example, this is accomplished through standardizing the presentation of unlike images, the montage of images and/or text (*Noon*, 2004 and *Beheaded*, 2004), and the literal melting and fusing of objects.

Undermining the clear-cut monstrousness of the media's characterization of Kaczynski, Andrade and Ayoung deploy the image of his simple headquarters--the shack where bombs were constructed--as filled with objects without apparent internal structure or organization.⁴ Made central and contextualized by video

³ Betti-Sue Hertz: 27.

⁴ "In a sense, Kaczynski is a symbol of what is man-made and natural, a combination of organized and arbitrary behavior--selecting random victims while being driven by his own idiosyncratic manifesto that vilified technology as something that 'repeatedly forces freedom to take a step back.'" Ann

works involving ominous weather, the student/worker rebellion in 1968 Paris (*Beneath the beach, the paving stones*, 2004), violence (*Scarred Heart*, 2003), and destructive collapse (*Tick Tock*, 2003), their positioning of disparate events insinuates that, while these images may be receding in time, what is at their core is perhaps exponentially maturing.

Placing the figure of the Unabomber, a symbol that tarnishes the veneer of American "us against them" dynamics, amidst various images of world upheaval and disaster, the artists, like groundbreaking filmmaker George Romero in his *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)—redefine horror by relocating fear to closer, more interior realms. This inversion, from outside to inside, from other to self, is played out in the final moments of Romero's classic zombie movie. The undead, from whom the film's hero has successfully barricaded himself, is nothing compared to the living lynch mob that ultimately delivers him. Culturally specific to American phenomenon, Romero's political motivations significantly inscribed a generation for whom disillusionment became a staple. Here, Andrade and Ayoung display "withdrawal symptoms from the already withdrawn event..."⁵ to comment on the zombie-like entropy that characterizes our collective responses to disaster.

Barlow, *Elsewhere*, exhibition catalogue, Art Gallery, Morris R. Williams Center for the Arts, Lafayette College, Easton, PA, 2002: 11.

⁵ Carlos Andrade and Todd Ayoung, *Tick Tock*, 2003, text from video.

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