

Theory of the ant

**INSITE/94 was
an international
exhibition of site specific
installations held in the
neighboring cities
of San Diego
and Tijuana.**

*Gallia est omnia divisa en
partes tres.*

Pierre Menard

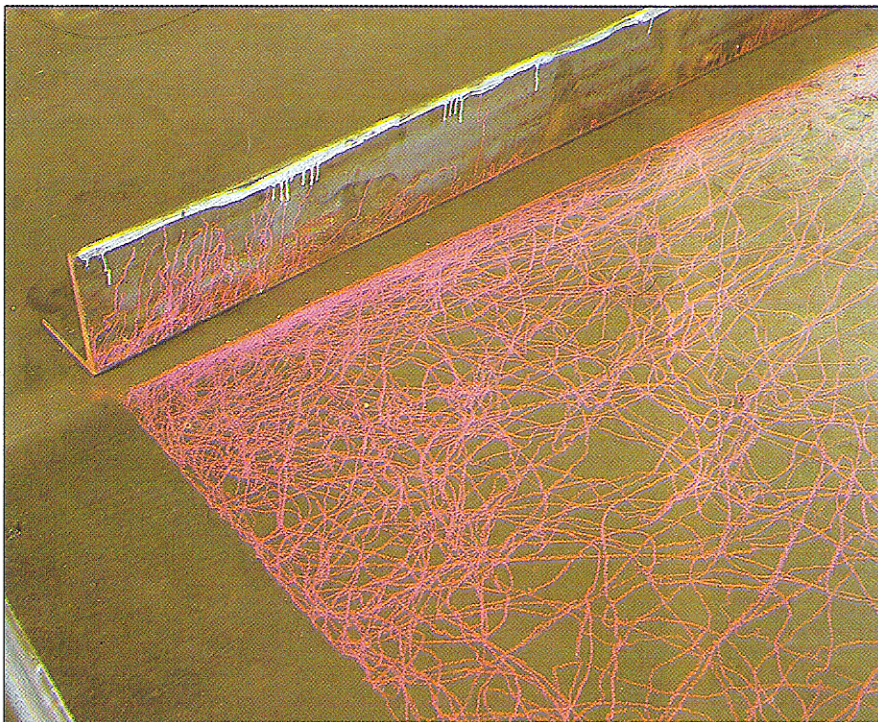
Moving. The Judeo-Christian doctrine considered it a punishment. The embers of collective memory in which Semites and Indo-Europeans opposed their concept of the world. The hunting vocation of Cain's descendents changing territory in search of a greater harvest. Since at least the time of the neolithic revolution the nomads had become the antagonists of the landowners, the masters of the Great Discovery: agriculture, domestication and the accumulation of surplus. The city was born around their barns and stockyards. Commercial crossroads became places for contact, embrace, crime. Hierarchization emerged with several purposes, one of which was to provide defence against plunder, giving rise to the mythology of xenophobia. Motivated by panic or avarice, nationalism is no recent invention.

Exodus or diaspora were seen as a process and not an end in themselves, concluding with a final return to the Holy Land. But in the face of hunger any city will be abandoned, just as any traveller who finds welfare will stay on. One of the major trends in the social sciences is to explain history on the basis of this opposition, a history made of junctions, the Voelkerwanderungen, or migration of peoples.

The end of the millenium bears the stamp of these multitudinous reorganizations. Confronted by them, the Western soul, actual homeland of the empires, made up of peoples which once arrived from other places, has invoked racism, has implored religion to consecrate its rights, has discovered the oblivion of its own origin, the indigence which led it towards the setting sun. It has armed itself at the threshold of the barn: fairness is merely dependence on Realpolitik. Because of the loss of certainty, the anachronism of all orthodoxies and the emergence of new forms of barbarity, philosophy has merely reprovisioned itself by adding to the nihilism characteristic of the turn of the century a reading of the prophets of movement, or its hidden side, the permanent. Parmenides the obscure was too attractive to modern heterology (to whom Severino dedicated his *Essence of Nihilism*, an essential key to an understanding of Vattimo); just as Heraclite and Paul Virilio, once called the post-modern presocratic, as if he had said that velocity was indeed the essence of reality(I). Or at least of the real-apparent. The velocity of the transmission, whether real or virtual, of information: the global village has recovered solipsism for epistemology. CNN removes any doubt: when we turn on the television the six days of creation just ended a second before. The dividing line between this culture which is fraudulent by definition and counter-culture is just another dimension of the frontier concept.

The dozens of people who cross the Rio Grande everyday are a continuation of the daily migration from Washington or Jackson Heights to the heart of Manhattan (the Indian island where the English immigrants arrived). A dramatic, human difference, but one which in the end is a *difference of degree*. The Third World is not a place in the

Yukinori Yanagi *Wandering position*. Two ants, chalk and metal. Installation at Santa Fe Depot, San Diego



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The nearness is
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Helen Escobedo. *By the night tide*, 1994. Metal and coconuts Installation at the Tijuana beaches

geographical sense: it begins in the middle of the payroll (and ends with the «throw aways»). The antithesis between multicultural and racism, tradition and exoticism, instigation and cohabitation, is nothing more than the last chapter of the struggle between the river and the stone, Cain and Abel, Narcise and Goldmund, becoming and being, flowing or stopping, which brings to the summit this fringe under permanent siege that we call the frontier line.

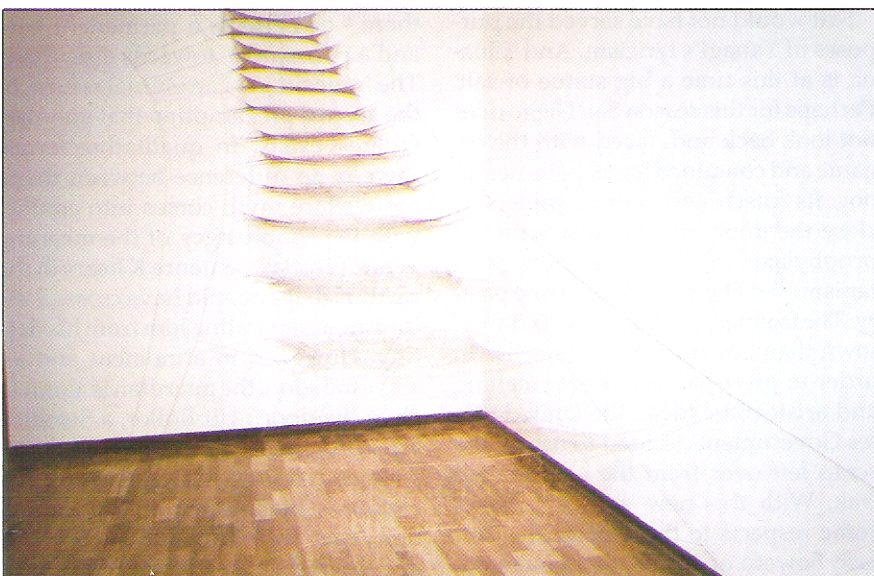
On the one side, a land which hope transforms into the Promised Land; on the other, Paradise Lost. Eastern Europe overflowing towards the West. Africa and Latin America moving North. Everywhere, human columns and boat people. In *Insite*, Carlos Fuentes quoted one of the placards of a protester, which read: *We are here, because you were there*. But the moral problem takes on a tragi-comic dimension, with survival being a right prior to any proselytizing discourse.

Yukinori Yanagi, a young Japanese artist, put an ant in a large quadrilateral on the floor of one of the warehouses in the Santa Fe Depot in San Diego. For hours he traced its frenetic course with a piece of chalk. Beyond its telluric appearance, the resulting line suggested new laws of chance, some relationship to theories of indetermination. The only obvious one was this: everything tends to expand, like a big bang. The ant, alone and without food, wanted to get out. The limit exists only to be overcome; the final meaning of building a wall is to pull it down. When I saw the other piece by



Silvia Gruner *Middle of the road*, 1994. Plaster figures and steel chairs. Colonia Libertad, Tijuana

Gabriela Lopez Portillo *Towers* (detail) 1994. Human hair and nylon thread. Centro Cultural Tijuana.



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Yanagi, an ant colony made up of flags designed like sugar landscapes, a montage of the kind for which the artist is better known internationally, I wondered why the insects did not concentrate their efforts on collecting all the granules to which they could get at directly. They insisted rather in excavating long tunnels, always trying to move further on. The accumulation of color atoms in the back space from which they departed and to which they inevitably returned, should have formed a single flag, the flag of the the melting pot, should be said; or that of peaceful coexistence, as some mellifluous demagogues might say.

Salt would not have served the purposes of Yanagi's lyricism. And Tijuana is at this time a big statue of salt. Perhaps for this reason San Diego does not look back and, faced with the organic and contained anger of its neighbor, its kitsch and frenzy, prefers to close the door, and to grow with the prophylaxis of New England's puritanism. San Diego is a saccharine pasty. The frontier is farther from its downtown than Los Angeles or Queens. In order to preserve this sweet-smelling and aristocratic ideal, the United States Government decided to use all the scrap left over from the war against Irak. With this new wall, similar in some respects to those of Berlin, Belfast, Soweto or Korea, movement co-

mes to an end, nihilism wins the day, the river in which Heraclitus bathed stops flowing and becomes a lake: it is always the same: Yanagi's ant dies. Against an enormous wall of wax, the imaginary trains of the Argentinian artist Enrique Jezik crash, stuck on useless rails pointing towards infinity. The mallets used to fix the sleepers remind us that progress was achieved through the semi-slavery of ordinary people. Looking at Jezik's work, I remembered Brecht's poem: «Who built Thebes, the city with seven doors?» The WASP country, was built by those -immigrants from everywhere- whose basic human rights were negated by Proposition 187: Realpolitik. This is the denunciation made by the work by Pepón Osorio, an artist who is also from the Third World, the Bronx. For her part Mildred Howard proposed the reconstruction of memory in a piece entitled *From Coal to Cotton* (somehow related to the lyrical piece of Eugenia Vargas, at least in the semiotic contrast between cotton and coal, hard and soft, black and white), who deconstructed the heroic saga of manifest destination: the journey to California was also a search for an Eldorado.

The train as symbol was frequent. In the Casa de la Cultura de Tijuana, Diego Gutierrez Coppe presented a train decked out as a black armadillo (a real panzer), the front of which could not be distinguished from the back. The train would have gone around in a circle were it not for a wall against which it is forced to turn back. There was no exterior or interior, here or there - or perhaps a permanent here and a permanent towards elsewhere. The imposition of an eternal return, or the absurd presumption that an «elsewhere» exists. In qualitative terms, there is no difference between them: the welfare myth comes into conflict with the contingency of the meaning of life. (The last sentence K hears in the castle is that he could have crossed the threshold separating him from his destiny. However, in a moment and always too soon, the guardian is about to close the door.) Ulf Rollof, a Swedish artist, pursued a more drastic polarity. Alongside a single rail connecting two countries, in the Freedom Colony Station, next to a dramatic angle of 45 degrees formed by the straight line of

the railway cut by an enormous metallic bard, he installed a circular track. A wagon, laden with pines, prevents the spectator in the middle of the circle from seeing his surroundings. In the axis mundi, spinning to control everything, he who was invited to be omniscient can only perceive fragments of reality, coached in the vortice of regular and permanent motion. Velocity has altered the meaning of things and even in the center, everything becomes relative: *the end of the ideologies*(2).

All the passengers on the ideological wagons of *Insite* set out from Johnny Coleman's baggage building. This was the decisive moment of the metaphor: fantasmal murmurings in the demolished office, sonorous traces of humanity, incongruent narratives or references to journeys begun before, departures and planned itineraries. The floor covered with grey sand, the suitcases filled with grey sand, some of them open and showing their valuable contents: grey sand, *their ashes*. *Your Ashen Hair, Sulamith*, the terrifying melancholy of Paul Celan or the dense nostalgia of Tarkovsky when he decided to leave his homeland and go into exile. The homeland is a woman, a house with warm soup, that tree. He who goes beyond the limits leaves shreds behind on the wirefence, that perverse immigrant against whom all the forces of intolerance and the senator for California are aimed. This is the cause which leads to a paroxysmal reproduction of the apparent elements of the original habitat: one is never so patriotic as when one is far from home. Although the interpretation might appear to be forced, it is here that the importance of souvenir in the reaffirmation of an identity besieged by a new context lies. Mario Lara and Barbara Sexton (like Osorio himself) show this ontological *horror vacui* in another horror of the formal void; saturation shows the new consumer situation(3), with memorabilia being an attempt to prevent the loss of meaning, belonging and filiation. This is the antitethical reaction of the «dasein» (being in time?) faced with hybridization, its survival instinct. Roberto Salas transformed the frontier peddlers of souvenirs into his demiurges. The little statues of Kim MacConnell in the «Ancestral Stairway» of Tijuana suggested new totems and new idols (Bart Simpsons, the post-

modern Bakunin): they were immediately destroyed by persons unknown.

Remembering Unamuno, there remains only the right to complain, to cry out. Terry Allen placed two vans with platforms on the ceiling, on both sides of the fence. Loudspeakers try to establish a dialogue between Mexico and the United States. The result is the discovery of the extent to which conscience has been contaminated by repugnance or propaganda-oriented reconciliation: communication is not a passport with a visa, but another version of the frontier. A few meters further on, the most eloquent installation, that of the Government of the North which decided to extend the fence and cut off the sea. The nearness is infinitely far. Helen Escobedo placed her metal boats here, useless but equipped with daring catapults for hurling coconuts up over the other side: immigrant coconuts. Another Mexican artist, Silvia Gruner, on the other hand, decided to invoke Tlazolteotl, with the goddess seated on the wall, exorcising it in the name of life and regeneration, against its bare density.

Ethnocentrism and multiculturalism are the action and reaction of the same system. The nationalist barricade is both a rejection of the invader and the terror of global uniformity. The loss of contrasting points of reference is tantamount to accepting a state of eternal drifting, at the limit, once again the limit, of all that man has invented to govern himself. The subsidiary cultures had grown accustomed to the paradigm of the centers as a scheme to be followed or loathed. These had accepted no other interference than that of their own nightmares. Now, the perverse situation defined in the term «politically correct» shows that the frictions have reached an unmanageable level, a level which threatens the internal logic of the metropolitan constitutional state. This sound and this fury herald the end of the individual, but not through the panacea of utopian socialism, but through the emergence of a subhuman species trapped in some kind of virtual reality, a species of genetic prefabrication. Fuel for the millenarist warnings. The Vital Signs group presented this final frontier at the University of California in San Diego. The subject-object problem when the perceiving will becomes a mortar to be



Johnny Coleman *Crossroads/Baggage building*, 1994 Installation in Santa Fe Depot, San Diego

molded. It is not a question of ethics but certainly one of legitimization. In the final analysis, the longest frontier in the world separates Eros from Thanatos. Yolanda Gutierrez, assuming this annihilation, has said that the only true journey is that which follows death, the only certainty; or at least this was suggested by the clouds she suspended at the Santa Fe Depot. More obvious was the work of Anya Gallacio, who pressed two dozen fresh flowers between two sheets of glass, and let them decompose... I repeat, the final frontier is that of the attack against life.

The ecological roar, although it is the most urgent, can only undermine the superstructure of an inherently self-destructive system. Luis Moret constructed a waiting room with walls of compressed garbage. Anya Gallacio captured this feeling of a species on the point of imminent extinction in the desolation of the old Tijuana casino

(Aguascalientes School Center): from the ruins of the sumptuous swimming pool in which a good number of the most eminent spongers of this planet used to bathe their frivolity, emerges a plant against a golden background. Gallacio discovered the only sensible response: the poetics of space(4).

At a time where there is no longer any sense of wonder in wonder, poetry becomes fundamental. Gabriela Lopez Portillo presented a piece of intense lyricism. The black marble towers are gravity, the ingenuous construction of our culture, like some uncomfortable Babel which is violently immobile. Alongside, the lightness of a staircase woven with her own hair and drawn taut with nylon thread, translucent and ethereal. At last, a path to follow, a way out to overcome all barriers, to raise above them, stairway of air in the air. Another country: utopia.

NOTES

- 1) Cf. his remark that «dromology» is the most appropriate epistemological posture in any approximation to contemporaneity. See *Logistics of perception* or *Esthetics of disappearance*.
- 2) In the final analysis the discourse of Francis Fukuyama is mere ideology.
- 3) This theme has been exhaustively dealt with by Baudrillard in his *Political Economy of the Sign*.
- 4) I understand the risk of instrumentalizing Bachelard: perhaps we are closer to Heidegger's points of view on the poetic habitat or Ernst Bloch's concept of hope.

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