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Towards an Ecology of Excess

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I discuss three experimental projects by Peruvian artist Rolando Sanchez Ponte: a videogame installation, a bio-robot performance, and an electronic sculpture. These works are discussed in relation to their formal conceptualization as forms of electronic waste recycling underscored by a poetic engagement with excess that carries broader suggestions toward thinking the relationship between difference and sustainability.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

The Present and Future of Humanist Inquiry in the Digital Field.

General Terms

Performance, Experimentation, Human Factors, Standardization, Theory.

Keywords

Installation, trash aesthetics, recycling, Peru, ecosophy, green technologies, robotics, electronic assemblage, videogames.

1. INTRODUCTION

This essay introduces the work of a young Peruvian artist and engineer, Rolando Sanchez Ponte (Lima, Peru), by way of three projects: *Matari 69200* (2004-2005), *Pabellon Psiquiatronico* (2006) (Psychotronic Pavilion) and *Circuito Desolation/Circuito Ciudad* (2007-2008) (Desolate Circuit/City Circuit). [Ponte, personal communication]. These works are sculptural assemblages of computer and industrial detritus that humorously raise the deteriorating conditions of social relationships, the environment, and human subjectivity in response to recurring questions around technology and sustainability. Ponte's artistic practice challenges the common association of non-Western contexts with technological backwardness, as well as comments on the paucity of mainstream techno-ecological formations by way of positing a concept of sustainability that is grounded in dialogue with imaginative energies.

2. THE THREE ECOLOGIES

Matari 69200 is a video installation of an Atari 2600 platform connected to a TV, and five cartridges of modified versions of Atari games (see Figure 1). The title combines the word Atari with *matar*, meaning "to slay" in Spanish. The estimated number of terrorism victims in Peru, 69200, replaces the machine's series number. Each of the five playable games stand for representative (televised) episodes of the conflict, reinterpreted by the artist. The project explores the coinciding appearance of videogames and the escalation of the armed conflict between army forces and Maoist guerrilla groups in Peru during the eighties. The work's impetus ensues from the artist's experience of the conflict through media by way of televised reports and videogames. The five games in the installation are titled according to the themes of each event portrayed, with the last game representing Ponte's commentary on the conflict. In *Penalties* (a play on the Spanish word for prison, *penal*, and the use of penalties in sports) the gamer (re)plays the state-conducted massacre of 200 prisoners accused of terrorist acts in 1986. The executions were carried out in the aftermath of a prison uprising, at the moment of surrender, on live television. *Acomarca* alludes to a rural Andean community in a small county of Ayacucho, near Cusco, which became nationally known via televised testimonials by a number of survivors of the massacre of 69 *campesinos* (peasants) carried out by an army patrol in 1985 (the Ayacucho province, an extremely impoverished area of Peru, was pinpointed as the epicenter of guerrilla operations). *Lucanamarca Revolution* refers to the Lucanamarca massacre of 69 campesinos carried out by a Shining Path group armed with machetes, knifes, and guns in 1983. *Towers Boom* re-plays the bombings of several high voltage transmission towers, attributed to Shining Path members. Lastly, in *Massacre,* the green ghost of *Pac Man*, designating the green uniform of Peruvian soldiers, and the red monster of *Space Invaders*, alluding to the Maoist ideology of Shining Path groups, are locked in a scenario of reactive attacks. Each game is accompanied by a score counter displayed on the left-hand corner, which informs the player about her progress in relation to the 'real-life' outcomes of each event. Drawing on personal experience, the piece implicates the alienating effects of spectacularized portrayals of war.

Pabellon Psiquiatronico is a sculptural installation of three bio-robots made up of machine parts and animal skulls capable of autonomous movement and voice reproduction (see Figures 2, 3, 4, 5). They are confined, however, within a gallery space that evokes a psychiatric ward. Each machine represents a particular pathological condition. The pig-machine pursues an undefined search; the cow suffers from nostalgia for an imaginary utopian past; and the sheep inhabits an interior fantasy world. This set of committed automata suggest a representation of the cyborg that, contrary to Donna Haraway's celebratory view of cyborg subjectivity, denote Foucauldian disciplinary overtones. This connection is intelligible in reference to colonization, as pigs, cows and sheep are animals alien to the Peruvian ecosystem, introduced in Peru by European settlers.

Circuito Desolation/Circuito Ciudad is a large sound sculpture evocative of an urban setting made up of eighty electronic

circuits, of which only one is functional (see Figure 6). The piece is assembled from discarded electronic and computer parts that are arranged to reveal their provenance in third world countries, where they are assembled. The work evokes a quasi-apocalyptic dehumanized environment that references the non-spaces of global urbanism. However, the eerie soundscape, recognizable as a manipulated field recording of the announcement sound systems of bus terminals in Peruvian cities, evokes allusions to faltering networks and transience.

2.1 Unthinking Divides

As instances of complex artistic assemblages premised on recombining electronic/bio excess and engineering skill, Ponte's projects challenge assumptions about the division of North and South along the lines of technological know-how. As critiques these projects additionally address a prevalent concept of ecology that conflates the pursuit of sustainability with utilitarian pursuits as conveyed by a conceptualization of recycling as a model strictly aimed at generating a new cycle of products. Implied in this approach is an "economy of scarcity" that frames the terms of sustainability in relation to control and management. [2] Instead, Ponte mobilizes technological and animal waste as metaphors toward extending the scope of sustainability to ethico-political concerns. This aim is closely related to Félix Guattari's formulation of "ecosophy" as a field dealing with the interrelation of expenditure and the three registers of ecology: social relations, the environment and human subjectivity. [7] The term connotes an cybernetic-based approach to ecology that, contrary to normative environmentalist perspectives based on the separation of human (cultural) and non-human (natural) systems, stresses their interconnections ("linkages" and "intensities"). [7] Rather than the stress on homogeneity and unification characteristic of holistic approaches, the emphasis on interconnection is in ecosophy associated with heterogeneity and difference. Likewise, Ponte's engagement of human detritus as a metaphor of interrelations draws on a notion of hybridity in the spirit of contradiction and defiance that is echoed through the poetics of excess coalescing these works.

3. SOCIAL RELATIONS

The assumption underlying the idea that technological expertise divides North and South correlates with the Art Historical canonical narrative that frames western art at the center of cultural production. Accordingly, the artistic contributions of so-called Third World artists are marginalized either through erasure or because they are seen as derivative. Within this view, Ponte's evocation of a quasi-surreal aesthetics would be posited to relate a regressive outlook. Postcolonial scholars and artists have contested this narrative as resulting from its framing within a teleological historical perspective, however. Within a normative narrative, artistic practice is classified by periods, each cycle assumed to lead to the next in a progression that yields a series of standard aesthetics to which 'others' are then compared and judged. Ella Shoahat and Robert Stam cite for instance the implication of linear temporalities for the framing of "the sociology of 'modernization,'" "the economics of 'development'" and "the aesthetics of modernism and postmodernism" within a technological, economical and cultural telos toward which the third world is understood to be striving. [15, pp. 28] As an example of how "a generally acute cultural theorist" employs a dichotomizing narrative that, in conflating politico-economical and cultural systems, perpetuates the classification of non-

Western and the Western realms along the binary lines of a Third World industrial pre-capitalist/pre-modern aesthetic and a Western informatics post-capitalist/postmodern aesthetic, Shoahat and Stam cite Fredric Jameson's writings on Third World literature and film in which he speaks of an "belated emergence of a kind of modernism in the modernizing Third World, at a moment when the so-called advanced countries are themselves sinking into full postmodernity." [9, pp. 1, 15, pp. 28] An analogous linear narrative frames the assumption that scientific and technological expertise irradiates from the North outwards, with the non-Western nations always catching up to meet the 'progress' commanded by the so called developed West.

Shoahat and Stam go on to suggest that linear narratives of progress ignore a systems' theory view of the global as a concurrent temporality, though the non-West is constrained by oppression. The tenability of linear narratives are likewise called into question by the complexities of non-western cultures that contain multi-leveled cultural influences (e.g., Latin America), and as such are precisely privileged sites of heterogeneity and differentiation. [15, pp. 29] As loci of hybridity, postcolonial cultural experiences challenge a progressive temporality based on supersession, while at the same time suggesting multiplicity as the rule. Within this historical view Ponte's work would be understood as an instance of surrealist practice ensuing from cultural negotiation. On these terms, Ponte's projects can be understood as the Peruvian analogue of the Brazilian "aesthetica do lixo." Though on the surface identical, a waste or trash aesthetic as developed within European Dada and further elaborated by surrealists connotes a distinct conceptualization in the hands of Brazilian artists informed by the influx of these artistic influences in Latin America. In contrast to the Europeans' intent on disrupting normative standards of artistic production as a challenge to a culture steeped in the throes of nationalism and imperialism, the Brazilians developed an "aesthetica do lixo" ("trash aesthetic"), markedly conceived as an anti-colonial gesture. [16, 18] The Brazilian "aesthetica do lixo" is an instance of detournement—an absorption and repositioning of European cultural influence that celebrates the endurance and inventiveness of the marginalized through the creative engagement of the excess of social privilege. This gesture of cultural autonomy was intrinsically tied to the broader struggles pertaining to socio-economic and political autonomy during the first half of the twentieth century and again revived within the repressive context of sixties Brazil. And as testified by the proliferation of remixing as an artistic strategy, its enduring relevance as a metaphor of social indictment and autonomous agency is invigorated by the momentum of networked globalization.

4. ENVIRONMENT

A modern aesthetics of remixing anticipated the devaluation of originality in the context of networked culture. Though this development also contributed to the validation of marginalized histories of artistic representation, I am weary of perceiving this as simply a cause for celebration, however. The taste for remixing developed in tandem with the rise of global digital networked capitalism and postmodernist sensibilities, rather than out of a genuine appreciation for a wide scope of artistic and cultural practices. Ponte's work raises the issue of originality in relation to provenance (of materials) as a strategic posturing within the context of reverse engineering as artistic metaphor and practice.

The work of a number of contemporary artists, among them Ponte, engages digital technologies in response to the economic, cultural and ideological homogenizing impacts of networked globalization processes. Broadly put, these practices draw on the emphasis on heterogeneity and differentiation (rather than originality) formulated from within artistic experimental "legacies" to challenge the "monoculture" framing of global digital techno-culture as connoted in Fredric Jameson's term "pastiche" (this term implicates an aesthetic and cultural inclination toward surface, immersion, a-historicity and depolitization). [8] By extension cultural critiques have employed remixing as a strategy toward implicating the context of electronic networks with broader transformations in paradigms of social control.

Ponte's works extend analogous critiques to celebratory discourses coalescing around information economy's premise on immateriality, which has (re)gained currency within the present preoccupation with sustainability and environmental concerns. This notion underlies oxymoronic marketing slogans such as "green technologies" (e.g., hybrid cars and "green" mobile phones), designed to appeal to progressive- and environmentally-minded consumers. The drawbacks of populist appeals to naive assumptions about the scientific and the technological as privileged sites from which to address ecological deterioration are twofold. First, a disengagement of issues pertaining to ecology from socio-political questions, and second, a reassertion of the 'value neutrality' of science and technology. Ponte's recycled assemblages of electronic and bio waste reveal the essentializing logic of techno-centrism through creative reversions of the focus on these discourses on repressing the materiality of information. In this, these projects differ from tactical electronic interventions designed to disorient with the intention to bring about critical awareness about the relationships between digital networks and power.

The three pieces mentioned at the beginning of this essay literally engage electronic (and animal) refuse for the enunciation of poetic reflections on the broader socio-political and cultural transformations associated with the influx of electronic and digital technologies in Peru since the late nineties. In each of the works technology, human relations and subjectivity, and the environment are envisioned in terms of linkages and reciprocity, and thus these projects are perhaps best conceived as transmedia ecologies. *Matari 69200*, which consists of five modified videogames plugged to an old television set, correlates the disconnect between Lima residents (*Limenos*) and rural communities, most affected by the armed conflict, in terms of mediated detachment. Urbanite disassociation is implicated with exposure to televised representations of the conflict, which are indistinguishable from entertainment (i.e., the abstracted 'conflicts' of contemporaneous videogames). Hakim Bey offers the telling term "involution" to refer to the alienating effects of mediated representations as denoted in each of *Matari*'s videogames. [1] *Pabellon Psiquiatronico* likewise connotes a state of disorientation, in this case "performed" by three mad cyborgian machines, composites of cadaveric rests of colonizing animals and machinic refuse. The bizarre behaviors displayed by these automata recalls Gilles Deleuze's and Guattari's linkage of schizophrenia to capitalist remappings, which in turn pertain to processes of "territorialization," a concept connoted to disruptive recodings of local material and affective assemblages. [4] Fredric Jameson's concept of pastiche echoes this correlation in terms of

positing immersion as a spatialized temporality (or a state of disorientation) typically apparent in the postmodern condition. [8] The capitalist driven transformation of the urban fabric of Lima conveyed in *Circuito Desolation/Circuito Ciudad* is similarly a "territorializing" urbanity. This work speaks of the dehumanizing impetus of urban space designed after a mirror image of global capital in terms particular to its exemplary function. Lima's urban model is spreading throughout Peru as "developing" cities seek to imitate the spatial paradigm of the capital. [3, pp., 295] The issue of provenance (of the electronic garbage composed in these works) is most relevant in relation to this sculpture as it renders visible the global production networks of electronics. The origin of the artist's materials in the numerous market stalls of Lima's black-markets selling low cost recycled electronics and computer parts is significant in reference to the impetus of the city's present development model within the context of Peru's neoliberal policies opening up the country to transnational capital in 1997, shortly after the times of violence. The distributive provenance of materials and the analogy with marginalized economies lend all three works their thematic focus on linking ecology with imaginative energies.

5. HUMAN SUBJECTIVITY

The link of these works to the underside of technological production and distribution networks, both in terms of materials and aesthetic strategies, foregrounds human agency, rather than top-down technological development. Ponte's projects can be seen as celebrations of the dynamism of the Peruvian context and the culture's openness and ability to absorb and make its own alien influences. To this point, Ponte gestures to the continuities between the Spanish colonial influence, represented by the three animal skulls that humorously suggest the consumption of European animal flesh basic to contemporary Peruvian diet, and the current neoliberal "colonization," which brought with it digital technology and culture, which is as enthusiastically incorporated and made part of the country's ecology.

Ponte's focus on technology as "part of the human ecology" echoes theoretical attempts at rethinking polarized accounts of technology as "either more or less neutral, incapable of playing any significant role in original creation or cultural life at large; or alternatively as vicious, inhuman and destructive of civilization." [12, pp. 222] In particular, postcolonial (and feminist) inquiries around technology, have consistently cautioned against the employment of binary conceptual models as touchstones for critiques. [5, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17] In raising socio-political charged issues about the implication of digital technologies in processes of subjectification, theorists also stress that considerations of the relationship between marginalization and technology implicates foremost questions of control and freedom. An analogous suggestion underlies the metaphor of "garbage aesthetics" framing Ponte's projects. This metaphor is multiple. Industrial garbage is urban waste and a cause of ecological disaster. The term evokes associations with mass media entertainment 'mental pollution,' mental wards as dumping sites of human excess, and urban gentrification. In its connotation with marginalized subjectivities, the "aesthetics of garbage" recycles human detritus to recover it as a celebration of imaginative exuberance.

6. CONCLUSION

In this manner, Ponte's assemblages intrinsically link human waste, sustainability (recycling) and issues pertaining to autonomy. As such these project dovetail with artistic practices that span from early twentieth appropriations of mass media for the formulation of cultural critiques to contemporary media artists' re-purposings of digital tools. These practices correlate with modes of thought that seek to question the terms of linearity, originality and authorship in relation to hegemonic socio-economic and cultural formations (i.e., capitalist spatio-temporality). The aim of this praxis is to effect a "praxic opening-out," which Guattari suggests to be constitutive of "the essence of 'eco-art.'" [7, pp. 35] The refusal to choose between regressive Luddite perspectives and infantalizing utopias as adequate responses to the severity and scope of ecological deterioration, and its orientation toward enabling the proliferation of processes of creative differentiation and self-determination, are its central tenets. Yet, its implicit suggestion of a concept of sustainability based on the cultivation of difference is its most relevant contribution, and challenge.

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Figure 1. *Matari 69200*, videogame installation, 2005, collection of the artist

Figure 2. *Pabellon Psiquiatronico*, bio-robotic installation, 2006, collection of the artist
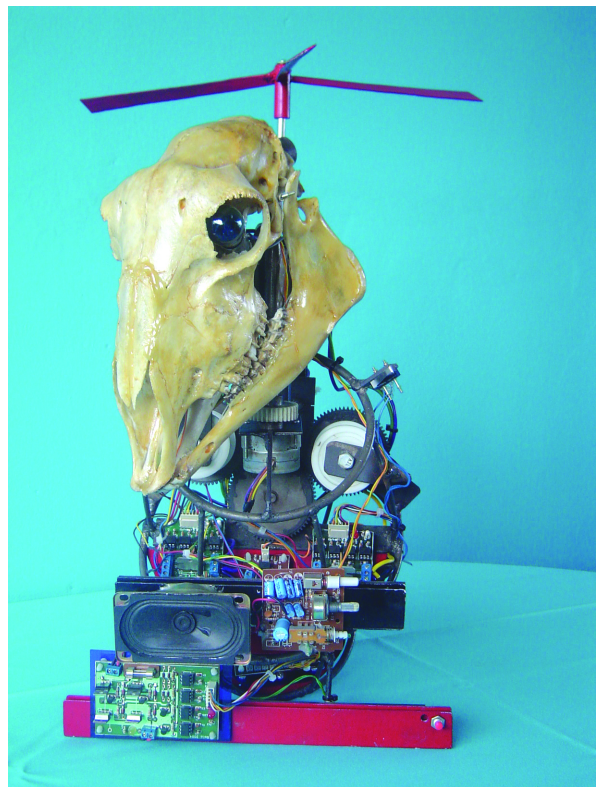

Figure 3. *Pabellon Psiquiatronico*, detail of the sheep robot, 2006, collection of the artist

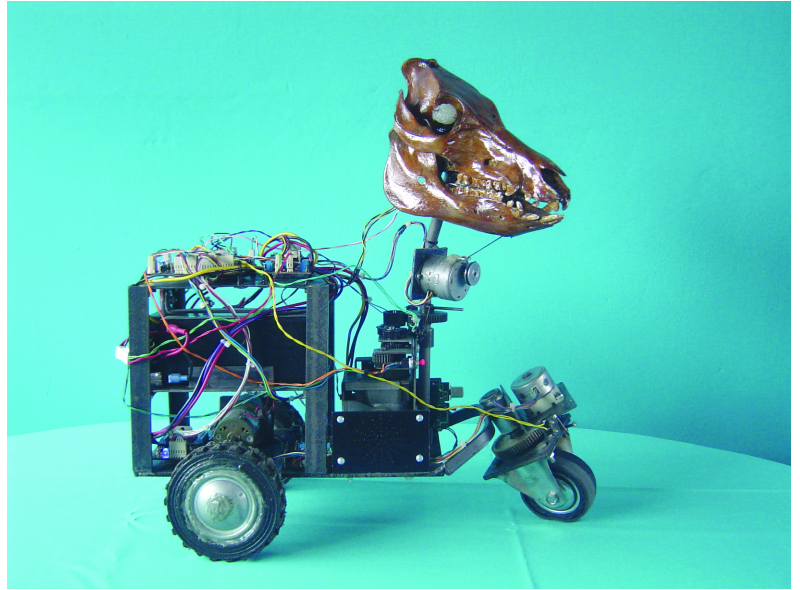Figure 4. *Pabellon Psiquiatronico*, detail of the cow robot, 2006, collection of the artist

Figure 5. *Pabellon Psiquiatronico*, detail of the pig robot, 2006, collection of the artist

Figure 6. *Circuito Desolation/Circuito Cuidad*, electronic trash sculpture, 2008,