

## **Rousing the dead**

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(catalogue FUEGOGRATIS)

Prototipos (2004). Seven models of strange tanks in whitened cardboard stand on a long metal table that is bending, manifestly not from their weight, but perhaps from the burden of melancholy. These rather unreal objects, these replicas of replicas, come to us from a fleeting image of the past. They are taken from photographs of demonstrations by the CNT-FAI (Confederación nacional del trabajo-Federación anarquista ibérica), held in 1936 in Barcelona, at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. Homemade war machines in carnival armour, made by cladding requisitioned vehicles with metal shells, they are like those insects whose gladiatorial carapace serves to frighten their predators, and are more defensive than offensive. Flimsy pasteboard weapons against the very real threat of the incipient backlash, these vehicles hardly existed. Period photographs show them being displayed in parades, proudly presented to a crowd convinced that victory will be swift and easy. In the end, they were never used.

Some seventy years later, they have gone back to being prototypes, ideal objects born of fear and revolutionary hopes that were dashed against the wall of History. The bright overhead light under which Jordi Colomer re-presents these vehicles, in the form of plaster and cardboard ghosts, casts no shadow on them. It is the light of the construction workshops from which they emerged, but also of popular festivities (the lights have the shape of the ones used in Spanish ferias), and evokes that unique moment when they played a political role in the midst of a public performance, a joyous yet desperate attempt to propitiate a destiny already being played out.

Other times, other places: the utopian promises of the modern machine, as a vehicle of emancipation, have, through the history of the avant-gardes, fragmented into paradoxical, contradictory and increasingly morbid ideologies, taking on Mussolinian accents in the case of the Futurists, or withdrawing into an onanistic, “bachelor” autarky with Duchamp and Picabia.

At the turn of the 1920s Kasimir Malevich started applying the Suprematist theories that he had previously developed in painting to architectonic forms, projecting his cosmic dreams in the form of the immaculate models of the Architectons and the drawings of the Planits. The Planits are the animated equivalent of the floating cities with the names of Greek letters that Malevich called Architectons; they are sorts of space ships whose plans he set out in great detail (with no scale, like the models of the Architectons), vehicles of utopia, Anywhere out of the world. For, unlike the Constructivists, Malevich did not insist that his models should be made. He rejected utilitarianism, the temporal, and aimed at the absolute, free of context. Perhaps he foresaw the imminent end of the synchrony of art and politics witnessed in the nascent Soviet Union, the end of the Revolution as a way out of History, and the return of History and its “human misfortune.”

In other words, with the Architects and the Planits, before he overturned his own artistic chronology and, in the end, integrated his own finitude into the Suprematist project, organising his own funeral as a celebration of the Black Square, Malevich sought radical, dogmatic escape from the fact that, as Russian philosopher Boris Groys put it (precisely when taking the transition from the October Revolution to Stalinism as an example): “Every political dictatorship is ultimately founded on a dictatorship over time. The impossibility of escaping our own time, of emigrating from our own present, is an ontological slavery which is the basis of all political or economic slavery. That is the unmistakable sign of any modern totalitarian ideology: the fact that it denies the possibility of the supratemporal.” And Groys continues: “Dogmatism is thus the source of any kind of resistance against the totalitarian power of time, because someone who maintains that certain ideas or things are supratemporal

—even without being able to give evidence of that—is dogmatic. [...] This decision is not in and for time, it is against time.”<sup>1</sup>

In the 1990s Jordi Colomer started creating works built around theatrical situations and set-ups in which the dramatisation of the installations and the artificiality of the cardboard sets served as a backdrop to enclosed sketches that seemed to take place in suspended time, as with the eternal repetition of the first bars of *L’Apprenti sorcier* by Paul Dukas in *Pianito* (1999), and the young blind man walking round in circles in a flat in *Eldorado* (1998). But architecture has always been instrumentalised in his pieces—penetrated, traversed or overflowed—and it was a scale model of a pale imitation of the *Cité radieuse 2* that was destroyed in the video *Simo* (1997) in one final enraged, destructive act by the main character.

This iconoclastic action involving a great modernist symbol, in a film which is in many ways about the alienating effect of architectural functionalism on people who are normalised and ultimately treated as consumers, is a precursor to one of the more ambitious projects that Colomer worked on between 2002 and 2004, *Anarchitekton*. Even its title, which combines Malevich’s terminology with an expression coined by American artist Gordon Matta-Clark, “Anarchitecture,” conveys fairly clearly the dim view taken of architecture as an eternal ornament of power and a monumental sign of the times, a hefty hand on the clock face of History. Behind the apparent paradox of bringing together Malevich and, at the other end of the century, Matta-Clark, a former architecture student who rebelled against a waning Cartesianism, the two figures invoked by Colomer here both represent an escape from time.

“Anarchitecture” was first the name of a collective that Matta-Clark joined in 1973, then the name of a show that they organised in 1974. In an illustrated letter written to the other members on 10 December 1973, Matta-Clark lists a series of “anarchitectural” projects, the first being: “A reaction to the prime-crime axiom of modern design fighters. Just a blank board with NOTHING WORKS written as shown. Form follows function. A photo of dogs sniffing each other’s ass holes.”<sup>3</sup>

“NOTHING WORKS”: these two words sum up Matta-Clark’s attack on the cosmetic functionalism of modern architecture, against the arrogance of those who organise abstract urban grids. Rather than build, Matta-Clark argued for “completion through removal,” advocating entropy and chaos as forms of life that struggle against—and survive—architecture. Matta-Clark’s 1973 “Nothing Works” was a forerunner of 1977’s “No Future,” which Greil Marcus in his *Secret History of the Twentieth Century*<sup>4</sup> analyses as a resurgence of the anti-architectural strategies of Situationism.

Jordi Colomer’s *Anarchitekton* is based on a series of photographs edited into a film and brought together in an installation. They were taken in four cities renowned for the resonance of their architecture: Barcelona, Brasilia, Bucharest and Osaka. We see the same solitary figure moving through the space of these urban landscapes, brandishing, banner-like, the maquettes of the buildings he is running around like some indefatigable athlete, a marathon runner without a number, or a demonstrator gone astray. But if he has strayed, then he has done so less in space than in time, by entering a counter-time, or an anachronism: what he is demonstrating for lies behind him, not ahead. He is calling not for a better future but for the reduction of these imposing constructions to the scale of models; he is trying to reverse the flow of time by laying claim to Suprematist prototypes. The process of the *Anarchitekton* is thus contrary to that of the *Prototipos*, in which objects were reconstructed on the basis of an image; here, architectural structures become models in a city-wide puppet show before finally becoming images.

The *Anarchitekton* films are in fact made by editing together photographs, and the jerky succession of still shots counters the illusory fluidity of the film. In his text “Desert Stars”<sup>5</sup> William Jeffett notes that, “Colomer’s archaic use of the technology served his comic, even dystopian view that the human use of buildings undermines grand architectural schemes.”

With *Anarchitekton*, Colomer leaves the closed, symbolic space of the stage to confront the theatre of urban operations. It is interesting to note that his relation to time grows more complex in the process, going from circularity to a series of back-and-forth movements between past, present and future, replayed in random order: a present (that of the action and the architecture evoked in the images) which summons up a past (resurgences of modernism in these postmodern constructions) in which the invocation of the future as a promise of emancipation fails. In a sense, the sequenced images of the four *Anarchitekton* pieces bring to mind Walter Benjamin’s definition of the image (*Bild* in German), as described by Giorgio Agamben: “For Benjamin, a *Bild* is anything (object, artwork, text, memory or document) in which a past moment and a present moment come together in a constellation within which the present must acknowledge the scrutiny of the past, and conversely, the past must find its meaning and its accomplishment in the present.”<sup>6</sup>

As Jeffett points out, Colomer’s photonovel has elements of slapstick, the mechanics of which tend towards anarchy and destruction, whereas architecture

embodies normativity—see *Big Business* (1929) with Laurel and Hardy and *One Week* (1920) by Buster Keaton. It also invokes the most emblematic of all the films made using still images, *La Jetée* (1962) by Chris Marker, another film featuring somnambulist wandering in which movement has become impossible in the folds of a present that is forever out of reach. In Marker's melancholy cine-novel, the hero experiences a Bergsonian principle: Space ceases to exist, only Time remains, as the sole, illusory way of escaping a dead-end world. In *Colomer*, the perpetual and discontinuous movement of the man constitutes the unit of measure of the landscape, but also turns out to be a temporal cursor that crosses the frame and perturbs its fixity, causing a split in the image, as if he did not belong to that space nor that time, and was in a hurry to break it up.

In Barcelona, Brasilia, Bucharest and Osaka, the four towns of *Anarchitekton*, Colomer carefully chose his sites, taking care not to create a one-dimensional moral or meaning. The Ubuesque parody that is the Ceausescu palace in Bucharest, embodying the most authoritarian form of political control, hardly fits with Kubitschek's social utopia in Brasilia, and the composite anarchy of Osaka has little in common with Jean Nouvel's ornamental Torre Agbar in Barcelona, the architecture of which, with its purely formal reference to the Modernismo of Gaudi, is the sign of institutional and commercial surplus value. But between the rationalised organisation of the territory (Brasilia), the representation of totalitarian terror (Bucharest) and the omnipotence of the circulation of commodities at its most fluid (Osaka or Barcelona), all of which are constructed efforts to adhere to the present, there moves this elusive troublemaker, half-critic and half-celebrant, who is not part of their world.

After this investigation in the capitals of the twentieth century, no doubt there was a need to find a place that escapes the dialectic of modernity and its relics. This was probably one of the reasons why Colomer shot *Arabian Stars* (2005) in Yemen, a country that, according to the artist, has gone straight "from the Middle Ages to post-modernity" and where, in many respects, these two temporalities coexist—witness the promiscuous juxtaposition of traditional sand architecture and buildings in reinforced concrete imported from China that form the backdrop of this road movie (in the literal sense of that term). In front of them children and adults parade past the camera laughing and carrying cardboard placards bearing the names of such icons of globalised popular culture as Michael Jackson, Superman, Homer Simpson, Che Guevara and Zinedine Zidane, all written in Arabic. Here reality mixes confusedly with fiction. Added to these is the sense of relativism that comes from seeing these names in this context: who are the famous and who are the unknowns in these parts? How do these names resonate? Or perhaps they don't and are stained with infamy? In this interplay of visions, between actors and spectators, *Arabian Stars* questions not only creeping cultural colonisation, but also the process whereby the Other is domesticated in exoticism. Then, conversely, it brings out the way in which a society lets itself be colonised by desiring a system of values while sensing that this hierarchy will ensure that it remains in the minority.

But by virtue of this carnivalesque procession, this demonstration without an object, the tension is suspended in the joyful absurdity of the situation, just as the popular celebrations described by Mikhaïl Bakhtin temporarily stopped the flow of time when hierarchies were overturned.<sup>7</sup>

Jordi Colomer's works are constantly effecting such reversals, inverting and taking time backwards. They thus undermine any attempt to project an unequivocal meaning and convey their critical burden only through the reflection of strange celebratory rituals. In *Fuegogratis* (2002), a whole suite of furniture leaps out of a fire to the delight of a couple who load it into their van in readiness for a new life: edited backwards, the film reverses the carnivalesque ritual of the destruction of possessions, the dizzy pleasure of loss and destruction, an economy of excess turned into the joy of dilapidation and expenditure. The figure in *Père Coco* (2002), a cross between a heavenly tramp and a Brechtian beggar, takes to collecting abandoned objects and putting them back into circulation, finds uses for them, scatters them again, then finds and loses them again in a process of perpetual motion. The protagonist of the film *No Future* (2006)—the punctuation of the “slogan” suspends the negative sense of the words—is another of these ghostly Colomerian characters who seem to exist in a world parallel to our own. Appearing at the end of the night in a car that seems to have escaped from some fairground attraction, toting a huge luminous sign whose slogan gives its title to the film, a young woman wanders through the grid-patterned, deserted streets of the town of Le Havre. Gallantly playing the snare drum below the still closed shutters in the street, she rings on all the bells she can reach in a gratuitous expenditure of jubilant and mocking energy. Hers is an “aimless wandering,” to quote Guy Debord's definition of those “psychogeographical dérives” that might take the form, say, of “hitchhiking non-stop and without destination through Paris during a transportation strike in the name of adding to the confusion.”<sup>8</sup>

Another sentence from Debord's “Theory of the Dérive” appears in one of the four sequences of Colomer's most recent film, *En la pampa* (2008). A couple of young people are wandering through the arid Chilean pampas, carrying an incongruous plastic fir tree that is gradually torn apart and carried away by gusts of wind. Apparently indifferent to the inhospitality of the place, they try to recall the words that Debord, in other times and places, wrote to mock the use of chance in Surrealist poetry: “Wandering in open country is naturally depressing, and the interventions of chance are poorer than anywhere else.”<sup>9</sup> Here, the irony is turned against both of them and the Beckettian situation in which they find themselves, while their determination to keep walking against the wind underscores the fact that the romantic end of the earth setting masks the hard reality of a forsaken place.<sup>10</sup> Chilean sociologist Sergio González in fact emphasises the difference between “pampas” and “desert”<sup>11</sup>: the desert is a silent place where there is nothing; the pampas is the inhabited desert, where people talk. To anyone who will listen.

- 1 Boris Groys, "Dans la prison du temps," *Politique de l'immortalité*, Paris, Maren Sell, 2005, p. 118.
- 2 In fact, it is a model of the Hilton Hotel in Istanbul, built by the American firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill ([www.som.com](http://www.som.com)). Thus the International Style has become the Continental Style.
- 3 Among the many instances of wordplay in this text, note the deliberate deformation of "Form follows function," the famous words of Louis Sullivan, which became a modernist slogan, here denouncing the sterile effect of formalism.
- 4 Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces, a Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1989.
- 5 William Jeffett, "Desert Stars," in *Arabian Stars*, ex. cat., St. Petersburg (USA), Salvador Dalí Museum / Madrid, Museo nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2005.
- 6 Giorgio Agamben, *Le Temps qui reste*, Paris, Rivages, 2000, p. 221.
- 7 Mikhaïl Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Minneapolis, Indiana University Press, 1984.
- 8 Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive," in Ken Knabb (ed.), *Situationist International Anthology*, Bureau of Public Secrets, 2007. "Théorie de la dérive" originally published in *Les Lèvres nues*, No. 9, December 1956 and *Internationale Situationniste*, No. 2, December 1958.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 The only economic activity of the Chilean pampas is the mining of sodium nitrate, or saltpetre. And it was precisely saltpetre workers, most of them Peruvian immigrants, who bore the brunt of the oppression experienced by the Chilean workers' movement, in 1907.
- 11 Sergio González, "Habitar la pampa en la palabra: la creación poética del salitre," in *Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, No. 13, Iquique, Arturo Prat University (Chile), 2003.