11-1-2014

Deconstructing Tercerunquinto

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Much of Tercerunquinto’s work around the turn of the millennium was characterized by a talent for the excavation of the spatial relations of neighborhoods. This interregnum was made particularly explicit in a project called Vecindad (2007), a word that came—on the one hand, to a specific kind of multi-family housing organized around a central patio, prevalent in certain lower income neighborhoods in Mexico City, or, on the other, to more general notions of ‘privacy’ and ‘neighborliness’. For this project, the artists prompted negotiations between the owners of two adjacent prefabricated- home units in order to reconfigure the wall separating their property, adding additional folds to its surface without altering the square footage of land occupied by either one. With an eye to the operation of the breaches in the collective’s work, it might be tempting to read the angular form of the reconstructed wall as a first architectural step on the evolutionary path towards defensive parapet for each neighbor. The most salient aspect of Vecindad on the contrary, is that Tercerunquinto assumed the position of a third party, abdicating and making an exchange between two different actors into the artists: an architectural intervention was but a pretext for a social process, which ultimately became the core of the piece. By contrast to Trañas para puertas, which materialized the antagonistic relationship between a landlord and his tenants, Vecindad orchestrated an act of mutual accommodation, the practical formal outcome of which being quite deliberately nil.

Vecindad was not the first time that Tercerunquinto had staged neighborly relations by spatializing them, putting them on stage. One of their more powerful actions, Proyecto para la MUCA Roma (Project for MUCA Roma), 2004, had already used confrontations between neighboring sets of actors to reconfigure and re-phemonenalize the barrier between them, if only temporarily. For this project, the artists sought to transform the space of the Museo Universitario de Ciencias y Artes de Colonia Roma, an outpost of Mexico City’s Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, by converting into storage space for a group of merchants who sold their wares at an informal weekend market on the median that bisects nearby Avenida Obregón.

According to Mariana David, then curator of the MUCA Roma, the project involved negotiations with several actors, including the Legal Department of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, “since temporally lending its exhibition space to commercial ventures made adherence to legal suits.” Individual vendors were eventually made to sign short-term contracts before they were assigned a padlocked storage space within the museum. The negotiations leading up to the exhibition lasted longer than the exhibition itself. The incorporation of participants in Mexico City’s bustling “informal economy” into the rented space of an avant-garde museum had the effect of putting the vendors—however briefly—à la with universities officials, museum staff and the city’s art-going public. Similar processes of negotiation have been crucial to some of Tercerunquinto’s recent works, notably Allégations (2003), a project that could be understood as a kind of Consulat Général de Mexico en Miami à la exposition Mexico: Sensible Négociations (2003) Instituto Cultural de México en Miami and Amanecer en Mexico (2003).

Unbeknownst to Laporte, Jacques Derrida had found his own way of “designating difference and articulation” with a single word. With Of Grammatology, his concern was to conceptualize the specific brisure that joins the putative linear time of speech to the space of writing, in the name (alphanumeric) sense of the word. He designed the juncture as a space, an absolute, an absolute which Spivak’s translation cannot nominalize as “space.” The lexis “Tercerunquinto” itself offers a handy illustration of what Derrida was describing. In certain interviews, the artist gave a double reading of this sign: to how they understand their name, which has often been rendered, somewhat misleadingly, as “third of a fifth.” In Julio Casarin’s words, “Tercerunquinto was a word that had been divided into two parts from the outset. It was born at the intersection of two linguistic currents: Gabriel García Márquez’s and the present Mexican Generation.”
A set of spacing procedures constitutes a counterpart to the breaching procedures described above. Perhaps the most literal example of these is Deleuze’s demonstration that the dismounting of all exterior signage indicating the museum’s name, moving it inside the exhibition space, where it was periodically cleaned and polished by untrained and non-specialist workers. 

This act of spacing confined the distinction between inside and outside by severing the museum’s proper name from its proper place. (Demida had of course already acknowledged that “the proper-noun of the name does not escape spacing.”)

The spacing procedure that distinguishes these projects from the breaching procedures described above implies, again, a relation to phenomenality. Spacing—the blank interval that separates the words on this page, these very words, here—is precisely the non-phenomenal, that which does not disclose itself to sensory experience. The impossibility of a gesture that would articulate these two different procedures has become evident only in some of the artists’ more recent projects.

Whether or not the artists had intended this to be the fall of Wino Buff To Fall (2009) was told by its own title. The proposed work was to be a part of Downtown to Res-olution, an exhibition curated by James Voorhies at the Columbus College of Art & Design in Columbus, Ohio, as part of the Renaissance Open Culture Initiative. 

The artists proposed to emblazon the eponymous words—spelling Michael Coleman, the mayor of Columbus at the time—on the exterior of the City Center Mall in downtown Columbus. Wino Buff was the site the artists were able to obtain a response from the city officials. 

With the collective negotiation process thereby foreshadowed, the project went unrealized, and the announced title of the piece inscribed itself in the artists’ performative gesture.

By contrast, Tercerunquinto’s most felicitous negotiation process to date has perhaps been New Langton Art’s Archive for Sale: A Sacrificial Act (2007, 2008), in 2007, during assembly at New Langton Art’s San Francisco, and after many consultations with figures at other institutions in the city, Tercerunquinto suggested that the non-profit art organization fulfill its most valuable asset—namely, its artistic and institutional archives, consisting of documentation for decades’ worth of exhibitions, including photographs, slides, press releases, postcards, and audiovisual recordings, as well as the organization’s financial records. 

These materials were collected in non-descript cardboard storage boxes and laid on display in anticipation of a possible sale. The proposal generated a series of impassioned discussions among the staff at New Langton Arts as well as in the San Francisco art community. Some of these debates were turned toward the act of the documentation of the project itself. 

This circular disambiguation of the structure of the project—now facing the possibility of an irretrievable, almost Borgesian—leaves more than a passing resemblance to the circle of infelicity that would condemn it Wino Buff To Fall fo et al sufficiently thereafter. 

The artists have repeatedly underscored the importance of the subtlety to their conception of the piece for New Langton Arts. It was to be a Sacrificial Act from an anthropological standpoint, the title of the piece constituting something of a category error, as sacrifice by definition entails a sort of erasing (but not necessarily an erasure) and—thus a form of commodification with the shrines—whereas a sale is mediated by the monetary form, would be difficult to regard as anything but the most profane of human acts. In fact, however, the artists were suggesting that the organization itself did not attend to both of its institutional memory and its symbolic capital, thereby committing a kind of auto-deception. The money form of New Langton Arts’ payment would merely seem as the vehicle for the organization’s resurrection to come. 

With this sacrificial act, the collective negotiation process has achieved a decidedly messianic cast. This confrontation with death is the experience of the impossible, or perfection.

And here Tercerunquinto’s analysis has placed them before yet another threshold. They are poised to take leave of the ontological that has grounded Western aesthetics since Aristotle framed the philosophical value of poiesis in terms of its relation to the realm of the probable. But to disprove this ontological, to depart from the realm of the actual, the probable, the imminent, or the virtual, would be to step into death itself. “The impossible is the final death, the necessity for destruction for existence.” The impossible, as Deleuze argued in his own time, is a special kind of aporia. 

A non-passage whose “elemental limbs does not allow for something that could be called passage, step, walk, displacement, or replacement, a horizon in general.” Through this predictable production of the problematics of the horizon, the members of Tercerunquinto—that partial and parable collective, that “something that is never complete”—have arrived at abstractions into which they cannot step.


No young artist can resist a $50,000 cannon blast, 2012. Installation view at Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, part of the group show: Resisting the Present, Mexico 2000-2012. Courtesy of the artists.