MYTHOLOGIES, SIGNS AND THE ART OF BRICOLAGE

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History is the object of a construction whose site forms not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the 'presence of' the now

(Walter Benjamin)

In the 1960's Claude Levi-Strauss introduced the notion of bricolage into modern French ethnography through his work The Savage Mind 1. The formulation of 'bricolage' appeared as the consequence of Levi-Strauss' extensive fieldwork in the Amazon, and as an important conceptual term for approaching the structure of what became his major life work, Mythologies. 'Bricolage' illustrated the indirect intellectual procedures, the modes of observation and reflection of savage or primitive thought. In this manner, bricolage was like magic, rituals and myths. "Mythical thought" wrote Levi-Strauss, "appears to be an intellectual form of bricolage" 2.

For Levi-Strauss, a bricoleur utilizes residual elements in the same way as myths operate with signs drawn from a particular language. Through bricolage new signs are created, but unlike the conceptual procedures of science, these signs "tolerate, and even demand, that some human thickness be incorporated" into reality 3. The sign, like the image and unlike concepts, is indirect. It does not relate exclusively to itself, but replaces something other than itself. This gives bricolage the quality of improvisation and level of contingency rather than instrumentality. Yet, while these ready-made signs have a high degree of indeterminancy, multivocality and arbitrariness, as within everyday language, the process of bricolage is itself constrained. The elements collected and used by the bricoleur are like:

the constitutive units of myths, the possible combinations of which are restricted by the fact that they are drawn from the language where they already possess a sense of which sets a limit on their freedom of manoeuvre 4.

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2 Ibid., p. 21.


4 Ibid., p. 19.
And yet in producing a theory of bricolage, Levi-Strauss suppressed an important dimension of its original meaning and admitted that there was more than one agency at work in the process of bricolage. While the derivation of the term 'bricolage' can be traced back to the French word 'bricole' meaning to put things together in an manner of improvisation, it has also an apparently contradictory meaning derived from the Italian 'briccola' as "one who breaks". In such terms, the procedure of bricolage signals not only the creation of new signs, but the intervention and breaking open of already existing signs.

At the same time, in introducing his first volume of *Mythologies*, Levi-Strauss would announce that the work of anthropology was as much the product of bricolage as that of myths created by his subject: "It follows that this book on myths is itself a kind of myth". The book becomes the work of bricolage, founded on the power of exchange or, in other words, on the ability to transvalue and assimilate cultural elements heterogeneous to itself. Working across cultures it produces a composite fabrication and new sites for the creation of Western mythologies. In these terms the objects of bricolage can achieve for themselves the power of a fetish, ready to assume and generate a livelihood of their own making.

II

In recent years, the mythologies of the West have become a central theme of artists working in Latin America and the Americas, such as Cildo Meireles, Juan Davila, Jimmie Durham, Alfredo Jarr, David Hammons, Dominique Blain or Tamelle Hassan. In the course of this development, the use of installation, of the 'ready-made' and procedures of assemblage, bricolage and montage have become virtually commonplace artistic forms of practice by which to both represent and dismantle referential signs of identity fixed by colonialist, nationalist and transnational discourses. However, this engagement with the question of identity is neither made in terms of a universalism embodied in the Enlightenment model of civilization, nor by means of an appeal to an essentialist or originary subject outside of history. Rather, identity is understood as produced by its relation to difference, to the in-between places that define the heterogeneous, hybrid or syncretic subject and the boundaries that always displace she/he as somewhere else, something other than the same.

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* Defined in this way, 'briccola' was used in medieval Italy to describe a war machine.


* While some of this work has been prompted by the Quincenetary of the Conquest, such work has been ongoing since the modernism of the 1920's - 1940's in Brazil, Mexico, Cuba.

* For another reading of bricolage and its relation to the ready-made, see Burn, Ian. "The World is round so thought can change direction". *Art Monthly Australia*, June 1990.

* For a further elaboration of this subject, specifically in terms of displacement and migration, see my essay "The Migration of Images: Inscriptions of Land and Body in Latin America". In: *America, Bride of the Sun: Latin America, 500 Years of Cultural Exchange*. Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, 1992, pp. 197-221.
While, to a certain degree, the de-essentializing of identity has come with the collapse of cultural nationalism and the reclaiming of difference along ethnic lines, it also follows in the wake of an ongoing history of the deterritorialization of communities and migration throughout the colonized world. This can be instanced, most notably, by the sustained experience of slavery, and the ongoing breakup of communities for reasons of economic underdevelopment or military repression and ethnic discrimination. Such experiences speak of the distinct modalities of subject positions and hybrid identities as much as the different agencies at work in producing these conditions.

In response to such issues, a number of artists in Latin America have developed, over the past twenty years, a critical practice that has attempted to dismantle the effects such institutions and agencies have had on different groups and communities who are not represented by the interests of national culture or transnationalism. The significance of such work is how it articulates the subject of identity within representation, that is within the practice itself. Analyzing the materiality of their own system of production, such practices uncover their own conditions of existence. Artists like Cildo Meireles, Jac Leirner and Luis Camnitzer, for example, use ready-made or mass produced and disposable objects, while Cecilia Vicuna, Alicia Barney and Gabriel Orozco recycle found organic and industrial objects in relation to one another, and Juan Davila, Gonzalo Diaz and Eugenio Dittborn rework the "archive" in their use of prefabricated icons or found photographs. By means of installations, technologies of transference, site-specific sculpture or montage paintings, the bricolage of different materials, objects and images becomes a means of opening a space for identifying different histories, local positions and agendas.

In a manner equivalent to the development of montage, their art works as a powerful cognitive instrument in which the viewer/reader becomes the subject. Bricolage is adopted as one of a number of procedures which make possible a critical intervention and re-negotiation of meaning. For example, by silkscreening political messages over coke bottles in a work titled INSERTIONS INTO IDEOLOGICAL CIRCUITS: 1. COCA-COLA PROJECT, 1970, during a period of the military dictatorship, Meireles refunctioned the commodity as a carrier of subversive desires. Then, in a later work ZERO DOLARS - ZERO CRUZEIROS, 1978, Meireles displayed a vitrine of artificial money, in order to suggest not only the arbitrariness and worthlessness of monetary currency in Brazil, but as a form of fetish which had little or no value except by virtue of its circulation and display as an art object in a museum.

In adopting bricolage to an interventionist approach and a deconstructive and transformative relation to signs, their work lies closer to Duchamp's use of the "ready-made" object as distinct from the Surrealist idea of felicitous coincidences or universality of forms explored in their collage work and poetry. For this reason also, the appropriation of the found object and commodity by Jospeh Beuys and Andy Warhol respectively, have played an important role in the development of recent art in Latin America.

For some artists working in the Americas, the critical value of using the ready-made or found and prefabricated object is the possibility they provide to perform and operation on its manufacture as a cultural sign and emblem 10. The procedure of reproducing these signs is not mimetic, but

deconstructive insofar as it disables the original function and value of the object or image. The grafting, montage, bricolage or assemblage of dispersed elements refunctions to expose the way violence is hidden within the seams or lies in the shadows and folds of signs which re-affirm the hegemonic relations of discrimination and power. In each practice, the concern is to re-negotiate a space in which the history of dispersed communities and heterogeneous interests can be recounted and reclaimed as a history of the present. The method of these artists is to provide a viewer with a space in which a connection can be made between the processes of representation and inscription and those of dissemination and circulation. In distinction to Levi-Strauss’s concept of the bricoléur, the recycling of these objects opens up a space for memory in which the individual discovers the commodification of culture and its transformation as fetishes of the marketplace or the sanctified icons of the archive and the museum.

III

Museums were built to construct a national history and cultural identity and by evaluating contested terrains of representation defined and legitimated some forms of cultural expression over others. As such the cultural boundaries that it established were, in fact, always in negotiation, always the place of intelligibility, a threshold of meaning and point from which different cultural temporalities were defined against the homogeneous sign of modernity. For this reason the subject of the border has played, in recent years, an important role because it, not only defines national boundaries and therefore identities, but also marks the site of exclusion and discrimination II. For while, heterogeneous identities were assimilated under the sign of the nation and therefore civilization, it also reproduced a peripheral figure of cultural and economic dependency.

In a series of paintings produced over the past six years Juan Davila has appropriated the figure of 'Juanito Laguna' created by the Argentine artist, Antonio Berni. Through constructing his painting as a support for the quotation and bricolage of pre-existing or already circulating forms of representation, Davila created a figure who mimes and parodies Latin American. Under Davila's guidance Juanito Laguna is transformed into a trans-sexual, a half-caste, a mestizo and hybrid, who is never quite authentic, yet whose heterogeneity epitomizes the effects of colonialism and Latin American as a culture of reproduction and consumption. Yet, as a figure who represents little more than a bundle of disguises, a mere cipher and simulacra of others, s/he becomes a pathetic figure. S/he is always somewhere else, a peripheral subject, whose condition of heterogeneity speaks of a bricoléur who improvises in order to survive and who passes life crossing the border in the incessant travelling of desire.

Historically museums had a profound effect in shaping the way by which colonial states imagined their participation in the European process of

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civilizing the non-West and in defining its dominion 12. As Partha Chatterjee has suggested:

nationalism... located its own subjectivity in the spiritual domain of culture, where it located itself superior to the West and hence undominated and sovereign 13.

The gathering of objects and images from other cultures by museums, and their subsequent display, represents an ambition equivalent to the workings of bricolage and the book of mythologies produced by the anthropologist. Museums abstract and aestheticize objects to produce discrete, autonomous objects and therefore open to contemplative consumption as cultural artefacts or commodities through purchase. This form of abstraction participates in producing a distinction between the public and private sphere, in which the museum corresponds to the domestic interior, aligning autonomy with privacy. Not only is "the interior", as Benjamin writes: "the retreat of art", but art becomes a retreat into an interiority 14.

The museum exhibition valorizes a subjectivity in which bricolage, hybridity and syncretism are transformed into signs of the artistic imagination. Any idea that these procedures represent a necessary condition of improvisation to survive is supressed. Conferring on this figure the stamp of authenticity, individualism has also found a way of returning through the back door under the cover of multiculturalism. Far from producing signs which reveal the asymmetries of power, privilege and hegemonic relations of discrimination, bricolage serves as a means of re-installing the artist as the embodiment of an autonomous subject 15. The different cultural modalities and the conflictual sites of cultural difference which have produced this heterogeneity are transformed into a signature style. Claiming a right to difference and celebrating heterogeneity and the aesthetics of nomadism, such artists have become latter-day heroes. With these artists new mythologies are created for State and private museums and galleries, whose symbolic capital represents the power of transnational corporations and mass media conglomerates to authorize the ongoing history of cultural deracination and displacement.

IV

The approach of both Cildo Meireles and Juan Davila has been to develop a practice grounded in the dialectics of destruction/construction at work in

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12 This practice corresponds to the function of the nationalist discourse and can be seen, for instance, in the Way Frda Kahlo has been appropriated to signify Mexico by interests both in and outside of Mexico. Shifra Goldman has published a series of articles on some of these issues in the context of the recent exhibition Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. See her most recent article: "Mexican Splendors: The Official and Unofficial Stories". Art Nexus, NO 4, April 1992.


15 The kind of art produced and promoted throughout the 1980's in both North America and Latin America represents a boom period in this set of interrelations.
the constitution of contemporary identities. Their work reinstates therefore the suppressed term of bricolage in Levi-Strauss's reading of mythologies, and recalls Benjamin's observation that there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism 16.

In a recent painting MEXICANISMO (1989) Davila performs a mock operation on the body of 'Mexico' and its appearance as an aesthetic style and sign of national identity 17. Using bricolage as a method of inter-textuality, Davila shows this to be a fiction, created by a collage of reproductions of its own culture and remnants of European images and values. He interweaves icons and images already seen and therefore as signs of stories and narratives already told. The painting, like others of Davila, is a patchwork of images made by both Indiana and others. He works in detail, stitching together as a handiwork this fanciful picture of popular culture. The sheer plenitude of Davila's collage exposes the degree of fetishization of these images. The pieces stitched together include a tapestry reproducing a Rivera but woven by an indigenous community in Peru, a Wifredo Lam painting printed and mass produced in Cuba as a curtain, an "indigenous" cloth bought in North America, an Andean copy of a colonial painting, etc.

Exposing the threads and seams between the heterogeneous elements, Davila's work denotes a condition which is precarious, belonging to neither one side nor the other. There exists a proximity between how these boundaries both construct and undo identity, a subject whose existence is dependent on the support and conditions of circulation: the canvas, the space of exhibition (the museum) and the market. Through representation the Indian is put on sale and sells himself. Art becomes marketable by virtue of the Indian and the Indian by virtue of art. They are produced as the subject of circulation and the matter of consumption. By this means Davila disarms the recent deployment of Indian cultures by the market, museum and by the State to construct a sign of national identity as a way of promoting and selling Mexico to foreign interests.

By subverting painting Davila's practice marks a critical intervention in the discursive practices and institutional frameworks that represent and reproduce Latin America. MEXICANISMO confronts the spectator with the politics of their own nostalgia for a residual authenticity found in the figure of the indigenous and concept of community based on a craft-based economy and collectivity of values and beliefs. Such nostalgia comes after the fact of their destruction. In this manner, Davila's paintings signal an effort to redress the subject of identity not in terms of place, but the experience of displacement and deterritorialization occurring across Latin America.

V

Over the past twenty years, Cildo Meireles has, through simple gestures of appropriation and alteration of mass produced objects and their subsequent


17 Specifically "Mexicanismo", refers to both the middle-class aesthetic movement of the Thirties in Mexico which drew upon elements of popular Mexican culture and to its recuperation in the 1980's as a way of characterizing an aesthetic style that based itself on the similar approach to popular culture. The painting by Davila is also discussed by Welly Richard in America, Bride of the Sun, p. 248-9. see fn. 7.
reinsertion either in the sphere of commodity circulation or the space of the museum, re-elaborated the possibilities of bricolage as a interventionist practice.

In a recent work OLVIDO, 1989, by Meireles, we see again his critical use of bricolage and the ready-made as a means of opening up a space of mediation for the viewer. The central image of OLVIDO was a constructed floor-to-ceiling tepee made of 6000 paper bills from North, Central and South America, and inside the tepee a floor covered with charcoal. Coming from the tepee one hears the sound of a chainsaw 18. This scene is surrounded by a circular field of three and half tons of bones and a wall of sixty thousand candles.

Like the consumer, the museum viewer seeks an ideological integration in the act of consumption, yet is inhibited by the absence in the work of any cultural content that does not itself beg the question of exactly who and what is to be consumed. In other words, the installation thwarts the productivity of productive consumption, a refusal of exchange 19. Meireles work suggests that the subject has been already consumed. It no longer exists and nor can it reproduced or recycled except as capital. Capital Succeeds in producing history whose trace is found in the charcoal or the sound of the chainsaw in the night. Analogous to oblivion, the charcoal represents the fire extinguished and the coal-dark night. It is the pitch-black of silence only broken by the sound of the chainsaw. There is nothing else and the sound reminds us that the chainsaw produces this deathly silence. The unit candles surrounding the scene are like the walls of a church sacralizing the new house built out money and commemorating the lives on which it is constructed. The exploitation and decimation of the indigenous people and the Amazon jungle become the absent subject. The concern of Meireles is to speak in the language of insertion rather than the language of Style, to move with the flux against the fetish of the Object, to listen to the Anonymous murmurings rather than the Voice of the Author. 20

By this means, Meireles creates a space of memory for the viewer in which the institutions and agencies that have produced the hegemonic narratives of the historical present are displaced by the signs of disappearance. In the process, Meireles exposes the construction of a national identity through the dis-articulation of popular cultural memory and reification of the indigenous people as a historical sign. These "anonymous murmurings" symbolize an absence that dominates the work. Everything here stands in for something else. The visual belies the truth. The fleshless bones, the empty dwelling, the forest turned to coal are signs of death and money whose value lies only in their circulation as museum art. As allegories of Brazilian colonization, the museum is transformed into a charnel house and

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18 This work was similar in its concern to MISION/MISSIONS: HOW TO BUILD A CATHEDRAL, 1987, exhibited in 'Magiciens de la Terre' at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris in 1989. This project was originally commissioned in response to the 300th anniversary of the first missionary expeditions into the Brazilian hinterlands in the South.

19 In this respect, Meireles' strategy shows a continuity with the Brazilian modernist movement of cultural anthropofagia in the 1920's and the Brazilian Cinema Novo films of Pereira dos Santos, Glauber Rocha and Rui Guerra in the 1960's.


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mausoleum, and the audience into spectators witnessing a history of destruction.

"A museum is like the lungs of a great city", wrote Bataille, "the crowd floods into the museum every Sunday like blood and leaves purified and fresh"21. In developing his theory of expenditure Bataille linked the museum and the slaughterhouse together, the sacred domain of religion and art, or as Denis Hollier suggests "at the heart of beauty lies a murder, a sacrifice, a killing" 22. Meireles' work reveals the bricolage of mythologies that Levi-Strauss had constructed as a sign of civilization that has banished the indigenous people to a place outside of history. For Meireles, the museum becomes a burial ground, and its institutional frame, the space of redemption.


22 Ibid., p. xiii.