

Moment, memento, monument, moviment

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Now the car runs along a wide paved road, between two strips of a yellowed and contorted forest, which seems to suffer in its existence, toward an empty blue sky. Then, lo and behold, two towers, or rather, two high, narrow rectangles joined together by a bridge, appear to be slowly rising on the horizon, like two hinged lunettes of gigantic binoculars. It is the government building, built like the rest of Brasilia according to the designs of Oscar Niemeyer, the genius architect who was lucky to receive an order not for a building or a group of buildings, but for a whole capital. (...) And indeed, for a moment, we feel Lilliputian and almost involuntarily seek in the empty sky the threatening form of a new Gulliver.
Alberto Moravia, *Baroque Brasilia*, 1960

Brasilia, lacunal space.

A horizontality where the eye is placed in the moment of a blow of sight, framed by the window of a car. The attention of the first-time visitors arriving in the new capital is drawn to the fact that what they see has a monumental dimension that demands a moving body so that the one can properly grasp the scope of the scrutinized objects. Otherwise, the reading trends toward the fragment.

Brasilia is a place of great distances (especially if we think of its three scales beyond the residential: the superblock, the neighborhood[1]). To cross it on foot is completely unlike any experience of a traditional city... Here, to shorten routes, one needs to subvert the desired path, those paths that are formed from feet on the grass (a subversion that streaks earth-red on green) and that, seen from above, draw sinuous lines in the rectangular lawns of the urban space. Here, the essential prosthesis is wheels.

The capital city was born in an era of expansion of the automobile industry, of asserting national growth within the capitalist principles of acceleration and autonomy. But paradoxically it was organizationally conceptualized with a strong socialist tendency, the ideology to which its creators were affiliated. A dystopic utopia, its destiny was soon to become the capital of an anti-democratic state. And the most curious thing is that its monuments, erected for the new Brazilian man, immersed in the experience of the city as a «collective artwork», as Mario Pedrosa had said, lighted the imaginations of those

constrained by a lack of freedom. In the new city, a utopia that loudly proclaims its retrospective (nostalgic, perhaps?) character, it's critical character (from the future to the past) as opposed to the well-known movement from the present to the future, to that which will (not) come to be[2]. The city-monument thusly invites us to that double movement Walter Benjamin refers to in his ninth thesis on the concept of history[3], with his *Angelus Novus* – a *posteriori* partnership with Paul Klee: here the monumentality of the city is one that it incorporates both a symbol for future generations of a so-called commitment to progress *ad eternum* and a *memento* of what is inscribed in the deeper layers of the land where the new capital lays, that which has been erased by the narrative of a construction from the nothing as this inhospitable and unknown central plateau was known (how can one not be reminded of Darcy Ribeiro pointing to the creation of the University of Brasília as an antidote to the advances of termite hills from the farms of Goiás over the futurist metropolis?). Land as red as meat, Alberto Moravia[4] would say.

Is this the fate of every monument: to emulate a certain symbolism and at the same time, eloquently serve as its destruction? And is not this the question posed by Benjamin when it comes to technological advances related to aesthetics?[5]

The dwelling of the common man is to be the symbolic monument of our time, just as tombs, monasteries, castles, and palaces were in ancient times.

Lucio Costa, "*Ingredients*" of the conception of Brasília's urban design, 1957

Creation is not an understanding; it is a new mystery. - When I died, one day I opened my eyes and there was Brasília. I was alone in the world. There was a taxi. No chauffeur.

Clarice Lispector, *The first beginnings of Brasília*, 1970

"We found the car!" With this e-mail began the final definitions of the *Monument Project*, by Adriano and Fernando Guimarães and Ismael Monticelli. So far, several steps had already been taken: a rich and diverse imagery and literary cataloguing, a long struggle with the proposed location of installation of the work, in the gardens of Funarte, in Brasília, in the Monumental Axis, a grand lawn punctuated by trees and whose horizon is defined by 360 degrees views of a flat horizon traversed by (sparse) buildings-

monuments (let's not forget that here we are in the centre of the "symbolic and collective" scale).

The car – or part(s) of it – had already been defined as an incidental object since the inception of project two years ago. A monument in motion, a continuous motor, rotating on itself, to be seen from the freeways that surround its place of installation and, in passing, by the pedestrians who take advantage of the shade projected by the enormous marquee that cuts the lawn from one avenue to the other (this car, at once an obvious and enigmatic object, has inspired the most diverse narratives about it).

For a time, the concept behind the installation was a kind of modern-day Zen garden populated by the discards of consumerist society: the remains of car wrecks collected and arranged in the manner of the stones of this ancestral construction of a "being for death"[6]. On the other hand, it evoked the set of *Crash*, 1996, the great film directed by David Cronenberg, based on J. G. Ballard's novel by the same title[7]: certain end of the world landscapes, the erotic directly associated with the imminence of death (or with the *post-mortem*). The aesthetics of the destroyed cars as sculptures in the manner of *assemblages* of the 60's: perhaps this is how to broach the *Monument*.

But the palette of red earth on the green grass seems to have defined the way the work was ultimately installed. The dispersion of fragments throughout the installation space was abandoned in favours of centrality, of synthesizing to accentuate the symbolism. The object has become unique, compact. And what is it? The car, a twisted structure that yet retains its essential elements for identification – its hood, windows, steering wheel, and seats (the back part no longer exists) – rises from a huge mound of earth that spreads through the garden and reaches the sidewalk. The rotating platform – like those used in multi-storied urban parking lots with no room for manoeuvres or access ramps – is practically buried. The whole mighty object is covered by a fine pigment that sticks to it. It becomes monochrome. On top, a flag is attached to the hood, as is often seen in political demonstrations or large football matches, fluttering slightly, accompanying the car's circular movement and the steady winds in the open space. Incorporated in the monochrome, a shade of its original design peeks through: there it is, green over white, the coat of arms of the Federal District, the flag of the new city, the eccentric capital of the continental country.

And there is another point that defines the interpretation of the work: the light. This light from the plateau, almost concrete, palpable, a thing of the desert. The set,

exposed to (almost) inquisitorial illumination, delivers a different configuration every hour of the day: in the bright sun, small details are revealed, contours, lights emerging from the short shadows. In a lower light, a graphic game of reds and blacks materializes (there is no dark light like that of desert regions[8]). And when it comes to the diffused and damp light of rainy days, shades of red clash with one another, created by varying degrees of humidity of the earth and by the underbody of the car that reveals itself.

The day after the work was completed, we gathered around it, watching it dance and suggesting possible versions of interventions in the empty space. A group of bus drivers approached us. There was a comment or another. One of them suggests a certain archaeological and police exercise: "they discovered a car buried here in the ground! Was there a body inside it? " One always seeks a subject, a protagonist beyond the machine, to humanize the experience. Until that moment, I had interpreted the work without thinking of anything emerging from an excavation of deeper layers. Captured by the shapes in motion, I did not realize that there had been an inversion-subversion there like the tracks of desire. To me, the beautiful form resulting from the fusion between earth and rubble eclipsed the object as a document of history, of tragedy, of death.

A monument in movement: how does one navigate the displacement of this piece of scrap metal, on its way to become recycled raw material, to its destiny of being a unique work of art loaded with symbolism? If the capital, as its creator points out, is all monumental – "the monument, in the case of a capital, is not something that can be left *for later*: the *monument* there is the whole *thing itself*" (Lucio Costa) – then perhaps this piece is an invitation to create a new symbolic identification, to put in perspective the permanence of its constructions and of its own history – "I view Brasilia as I view Rome: Brasilia began as a last simplification of ruins" (Clarice Lispector). Perhaps we can conceive of a fleeting monument, found by chance in a public space and elevated to symbol status by our eyes (while our eyes are on the object, or through photographic documentation, for example, to further cement its status[9]). Thus, in the middle of the space (scale) that most symbolizes permanence - the Monumental Axis - the artists erected the monument-rest, to be kept in our memory as an ephemeral note (perhaps to

be submerged between the lost layers of those times when this was a place of simple, everyday activities, the type that is repeated and forgotten... human-sized).

Last Saturday, I met one of the mediators working on the Project. He told me something quite probable, yet that curiously surprised me: in the heavy rains, the powdered pigment turned to mud, it ran and stained the car and the car's original colour peeked through the earth (Bordeaux? Graphite gray? Navy blue? Impossible to say). The flag changed position: now, almost horizontal, the mast acts as a spear. What monument would this be? New possibilities of interpretation arise from a trip to the site – almost anthropomorphized, the twisted piece seems to carry the spear. A medieval view, produced by the symbol of the great advances of the 20th century, in the heart of the futuristic city... a subversive drift of the imaginary that the monument asks of us. Moment, memento, movement.

[1] "(...) the four scales that presided over the very conception of the city: the symbolic and collective, monumental; the domestic, or residential; the social, or gregarious, and the leisure, or bucolic... ". Lucio Costa in *Guidelines for the Preservation of the Integrity of the Plano Piloto*, 1990, published in the book *Brasília - Critical Anthology* (Cosac Naify, 2012), p. 292.

[2] "Usually, utopia is thought of as something out of reality, illusion, escape, fantasy, delusion, empty designs. This form of utopia would work in the classic present - future vector. Its horizon would always be to seek to become real. If we are restricted to this perspective, such utopian forms lose their force. As Roger Dadoun proposes, we can reverse the direction of the vector and think of a utopia as a movement that goes from the future to the past, in a current against reality. Thusly the utopia acquires its virtue of social criticism. " Edson Andre de Souza in *For a Culture of Utopia*, 2011, published in *E-topia: Electronic Journal of Studies on Utopia*, Issue no. 12.

[3] "(...) Klee has a piece entitled *Angelus Novus*. It depicts an angel who seems to want to move away from something that is in his face. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see a chain of events, he sees a single catastrophe, which tirelessly accumulates ruin over ruin and scatters at our feet ... But a storm blows from paradise and clings to its wings with such force that he can no longer close them ... This storm is what we call progress". Walter Benjamin in *On the Concept of History*, 1940, published in the book *Selected Works - Magic and Technique, Art and Politics* (Brasiliense, 1987), p. 224.

[4] "Viewed from a plane, Brasília, situated as if by chance, amidst the infinite horizontal undulations of the plateau (...), makes one think of a large number of bloody steaks set out on a butcher's counter. Squares of varying redness, according to varying earth leveling time periods,

reveal the buildable areas from uprooted tropical forest. " Alberto Moravia in *Baroque Brasilia*, 1960, published in the book *Brasilia – A critical anthology* (Cosac Naify, 2012), p. 90.

[5] In texts such as *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, *A Short History of Photography*, *The Author as Producer*, *On the Concept of History* and, undoubtedly, his book *The Arcades Project*.

[6] "(...) a shallow field made up of basically sand, gravel, and stones captures the simple essence of Nature, not its actual appearance. The sand on the ground is swept, representing the flow of waves, and the stones are arranged in a manner that reminds the mountains. This type of garden is usually small, and they are not built for walking, but rather to be admired from a specific place. [The Zen garden] (...) does not symbolize. It does not have the value of representing any natural beauty that can be found in the world, real or mythical ... [It is] an abstract composition of the "nature" made up of objects in space, a composition whose function is to incite meditation. Available at <http://www.jardimjapones.com.br/2012/03/jardins-zen-karesansui>.

[7] "There's nothing to believe now ... There's this vacuum... what people have most longed for, which is the consumer society, has come to pass. Like all dreams that come to pass, there's a nagging sense of emptiness. So, they look for anything, they believe in any extreme. Any extreme nonsense is better than nothing. Well, I think we're well on the track to all kinds of craziness. I think there's no end to what sort of nonsense will come out of the woodwork, and a lot of very dangerous nonsense. I could sum up the future in one word, and that word is boring. The future is going to be boring." J. G. Ballard in *Do not Crash: The J. G. Ballard Interview*, 1995.

[8] On that note, it is worth consulting two texts in the catalog of the exhibition *The Constructions of Brasilia* (Moreira Salles Institute, 2010), which focused on the work of photographers who recorded the birth of the city: *The construction of the shadow* by Lorenzo Mammi (regarding the work of Marcel Gautherot) and *The Brasilia of Thomaz Farkas* by Sergio Burgi. In both, there is an emphasis on stark contrasts, on the dramatic blacks of the shadows in the new capital, as a poetic resource.

[9] One can think of several contemporary artists who have bent over the cataloging of "incidental monuments" such as Marcos Chaves, Cao Guimaraes and Julia Milward (a young artist who called my attention to this change of status).

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