On the Trail (An Open Letter and Series of Meanderings)

I. Crossing Paths

Perhaps tellingly the first of the months-long dialogue Joao and I would have that culminated in this essay happened on the steps of the Fundação Oriente (the very building in which this exhibition will be installed). He had just gotten back from a residency in Beijing and I was soon to depart for the States. No less significant was that we crossed paths, quite literally, on those steps due to TIMC and the Congress of Portuguese Architects that were happening in the city – events that brought together individuals from across all corners of the globe to Macau. The subsequent exchanges occurred via email across a variety of extremely far-flung locales and the conversation often oscillated typically between apologies for delay due to travel, friendly holiday greetings, discussions of various theoretical concepts, mundane questions of technical procedures, and banal pleasantries. All of these aspects could constitute, of course, the content of most any email. Still for some reason I couldn't shake off the idea that somehow, the very dislocated nature of these exchanges had a lot to say about a work that is so highly site specific. The title is after all "Recursive Geography" and as a result very much rooted in a specific place, a specific *topos*, and a procedure that reproduces itself ad infinitum. Likewise certain questions continued to forcefully keep popping up in my mind, chief of which was, why present a series of landscape photography in the same territory it geographically coexists with? And even more pressingly, for me personally as an author, how does one begin a text that will be by very nature of the peculiarities of the SAR, be trilingual in its final form and therefore reflect the landscape in which it emerged, however tangentially. Though we share adjacent geographic spaces and each calls this part of Southern China home, how does one even begin to question the idea of "place" in all its real and fictive dimensions? It was later in continuing discussions with the artist that I would come to understand the work as belonging to an ethical regime of image-making, and begin to more truly follow the artist's path[1].

II. Arboreal Wanderings

In order to get to the root of this question, which I feel permeates Joao's work and my personal understanding of it, it is important to note a generational attitude toward Modernism and Post-modernism and all the other "Posts" that have come in the aftermath. I believe that Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of the *Radicant* (in and of itself a generationally modified understanding of Gilles Deleuze) is especially helpful to contextualize this work. Bourriaud notes: "And yet the immigrant the exile, the tourist, and the urban wanderer are the dominant figures of contemporary culture. To remain within the vocabulary of the vegetable realm, one might say that the individual of the early years of the Twenty-First century resembles those plants that do not depend on a single root for their growth but advance in all directions on whatever surfaces present themselves by attaching multiple hooks to them…With its at once dynamic and dialogical signification, the adjective "radicant" captures this contemporary subject caught between the need for a connection with its environment and the forces of uprooting, between globalization and singularity, between identity and opening to the other. It defines the subject as an

[1] The invocation of the *detour* or wandering by Jacques Rancierre as well as the questioning of the end result of image-making within a community permeate this essay and my own thinking on the use and truth content of the work presented. "A detour is necessary here in order to clarify this notion and situate the problem. With regard to what we call *art* it is fact possible to distinguish, within the Western tradition three major regimes of identification. There is the first of all what I propose to call an ethical regime of images. In this regime 'art' is not identified as such but subsumed under the questions of images. As a specific type of entity images are the object of a twofold question: the question of their origin (and consequently truth content) and the question of their end or purpose, the uses they are put to and the effects they result in." Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics,* MPG Books Ltd. Bodwim, Cornwall, UK, 2004. p. 21. "It is in this sense that I speak of an ethical regime of images. In this regime, it is a matter of knowing in what way images' mode of being affects the *ethos*, the mode of being of individuals and communities." Ranciere, Ibid. p. 20.

object of negotiation."[2]

I find the borrowing of Bourriaud's concept of the *Radicant* especially pertinent in its evocation of the arboreal and the focus on movement in light of Joao's previous work on cinema and architecture. Additionally in discussion with the artist he often revealed his interest in the cinematic and natural aspects of Macau in opposition (or perhaps juxtaposition) with the artificial, but no less globalized and cinematic qualities of the tourist-known Macau. And so in turning back to initial question what is one to make of this work and it's title "Recursive Geography"? How does one begin to reconcile its obvious interest in Macau's older history and present reality all while significantly consciously avoiding the "elephant in the room" that is the present state of Macau's development? And what exactly are the photos valorizing, the paradox of the "artificialization" of the landscape or an attempt to document a natural sublime. The photos themselves are always taken at the same pseudo-scientific vantage point (eye-level) and framed consistently the same way to have a consistent perspectival focus where the line of sight converges in the center of the frame. The only times the frame seems to wonder are when the artist's eye is caught by an odd arboreal or aberrant geographic feature. While this oddly scientific gaze may at first seem to be apathetic and aloof and therefore devoid of politics, I would argue it points to a deeper and conflicted politics that reveals much about the precarious situation of the SAR and our own role as architects and artists in the construction of vast new utopian worlds at the sacrifice of an older natural world and landscape[3].

III. A Middle Landscape

So what does this all mean? Should this project that reveals so many contradictions, divides, and competing spaces of desires between the artificial and natural be held accountable to *say* something. Should it concretely weigh in on one side of the argument of nature versus concrete? Of the embrace of rampant casino development versus the total rejection of that model of development? My response would be an emphatic no. We have for too long seen the calcification of arguments on either side. And if nothing else this essay is a defense for something in between, a radical politics that informs of the contradictions that exist and rather than offer a calcified and concrete view, and much like the work that inspired the essay, it seeks to create fissures in the discourse and then subsequently take advantage of those fissures that are so desperately needed. Perhaps these fissures, much like the like the geographical features presented in the photos, can be a new middle landscape of discourse that leads to a productive rethinking of our current models of development and our relationship to the city and nature. [4]

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[2] Nicholas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, Lukas and Steinberg, 2009. pg 51

[3] Again Rancierre's concept of 'fictionality' in regard to specific places and spaces is highly useful in understanding the conceptual agenda embedded in the photos. "It is the identification of modes of fictional construction with means of deciphering the signs inscribed in the general aspect of a place, a group, a wall, an article of clothing, a face. It is the association between, on one hand, accelerations or decelerations of language, its shuffling of images or sudden changes of tone, all its difference of potential between the insignificant and the overly significant or overly meaningful, and on the other hand, the modalities of a trip through the landscape of significant traits deposited in the topography of spaces, the physiology of social circles, the silent expression of bodies. The 'fictionality' specific to the aesthetic age is consequently distributed between two poles: the potential meaning inherent in everything silent and the proliferation of modes of speech and meaning." Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics,* MPG Books Ltd. Bodwim, Cornwall, UK, 2004. pp. 36-37

[4] Regarding a new middle landscape of politics and the desire for a more open model of discourse, two pieces of text kept coming forcefully to mind during the writing of this essay. The first is again from Ranciere, "The real must be fictionalized in order to be thought.[...] The notion of "narrative" locks us into oppositions between the real and the artifice where both the positivists and the deconstructionists are lost. It is not a matter of claiming that everything is fiction. It is a matter of stating that the fiction of the aesthetic age defined models for connecting the presentation of facts and forms of intelligibility that blurred the border between the logic of facts and the logic of fiction." [Further] "politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct fictions, that is to say material rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done." Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics,* MPG Books Ltd. Bodwim, Cornwall, UK, 2004. pp. 38-39. The second is from a conversation and interview of the American author David Foster Wallace by Dave

IV. Postcript… Or thoughts on a Solitary Tree

Over the past months in various locales, much the way this essay began, I have continually returned to the idea of the trail that is this text, in attempts to rework it, to more fully explore the wandering paths and detours of the politics and ethics of the work that inspired it. Yet throughout all these meanderings I have constantly found myself returning to a single photo numbered #2531. I wish I could explain more or articulate more fully why this photo of a lone tree in the centre of the frame, seems to sum up the entire body of work in such a quiet yet eloquent manner. I am not sure what it is, but it seems to stand there demanding *something*. Something better than the status quo, an argument for more than its current reality. It more, than any of the other photos resonates with me and I believe fully reveals the artist's stated intentions and attitude towards the uses of fiction.[5] It is indeed an odd photo to fixate on, but alone in a landscape standing so somberly resilient it also seems to be the most hopeful for what may lie ahead.

-Joshua Roberts

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Eggers on the need for young authors to engage in political writing. Taken together they form much of the basis for the call to turn away from older calcified arguments and the need for engagement expressed in this text. "The reason why doing political writing is so hard right now is probably also the reason why more young (am I included in the range of this predicate anymore?) fiction writers ought to be doing it. As of 2003, the rhetoric of the enterprise is fucked. 95 percent of political commentary, whether spoken or written, is now polluted by the very politics it's supposed to be about. Meaning it's become totally ideological and reductive: The writer/speaker has certain political convictions or affiliations, and proceeds to filter all reality and spin all assertion according to those convictions and loyalties. Everybody's pissed off and exasperated and impervious to argument from any other side. Opposing viewpoints are not just incorrect but contemptible, corrupt, evil. Conservative thinkers are balder about this kind of attitude: Limbaugh, Hannity, that horrific O'Reilly person. Coulter, Kristol, etc. But the Left's been infected, too. Have you read this new Al Franken book? Parts of it are funny, but it's totally venomous (like, what possible response can rightist pundits have to Franken's broadsides but further rage and return-venom?). Or see also e.g. Lapham's latest *Harper's* columns, or most of the stuff in the *Nation,* or even *Rolling Stone.* It's all become like Zinn and Chomsky but without the immense bodies of hard data these older guys use to back up their screeds. There's no more complex, messy, community-wide argument (or "dialogue"); political discourse is now a formulaic matter of preaching to one's own choir and demonizing the opposition. Everything's relentlessly black-and-whitened. Since the truth is way, way more gray and complicated than any one ideology can capture, the whole thing seems to me not just stupid but stupefying. Watching O'Reilly v. Franken is watching bloodsport. How can any of this possibly help me, the average citizen, deliberate about whom to choose to decide my country's macroeconomic policy, or how even to conceive for myself what that policy's outlines should be, or how to minimize the chances of North Korea nuking the DMZ and pulling us into a ghastly foreign war, or how to balance domestic security concerns with civil liberties? Questions like these are all massively complicated, and much of the complication is not sexy, and well over 90 percent of political commentary now simply abets the uncomplicatedly sexy delusion that one side is Right and Just and the other Wrong and Dangerous. Which is of course a pleasant delusion, in a way—as is the belief that every last person you're in conflict with is an asshole—but it's childish, and totally unconducive to hard thought, give and take, compromise, or the ability of grown-ups to function as any kind of community." "Dave Eggers in conversation with David Foster Wallace," *The Believer,* November 2009.

[5] "Fiction may be regarded as the ultimate genre that is capable of combining all knowledge (science, technology and imagination) towards one specific goal, which is to anticipate the future for the betterment of humankind. It is by means of this fantasy that possible worlds–real and imaginary–may intentionally collide to erupt a different one, not entirely new, but with different motivations. When this happens, it revolutionizes past dogmas and can permanently alter the way we perceive and understand the surrounding present and, therefore, opening the expectations for the coming community." From the artitst's own work, Joao O, *Chronicles of the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion: Facts, Interpretations, Mistakes, Fictions and Myths,* Barcelona, 2010 p. 22