

SLUMS DO STINK:

ARTISTS, BRICOLAGE AND OUR NEED FOR DOSES OF “REAL” LIFE.

A text by Patricio del Real

After opening the commercial double-pane glass door and crossing the threshold that awkwardly welcomes us in – an decidedly seals us off from the pristine place from which we came – we feel transported; suddenly we are in another world. A tattered wood shack dominates this strange environment. It is uninviting: the rusted, corrugated metal door, the haphazard construction (the whole thing is tilting!), the jumble of old barbed wire evoke the precarious conditions of slum areas or abandoned places. The fascination it provokes makes it uncomfortably alluring. There is something (someone) there; we can sense it (him or her) hiding from us. As we move around, through this landscape of forgotten objects – an unsteady wooden ladder, an old fence, a corroding metal box spring – we attempt to make sense of it all. It resembles too closely those landscapes of decaying America that we approach only from the distance of our speeding cars (or our televisions). Some observers give a cursory, polite nod and head for the door, happy to abandon the debris and return to the safety of a sterile space. Others stay, as if waiting for the inhabitant of the shack to eventually come out.

This is no slum, no rural shed, but Anthony Burdin’s installation for *Day for Night*, the 2006 Biennial of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Burdin’s intentions are clear: to create an environment that transports us from the consecrated space of the gallery to the disintegrating landscape of a nomadic recording artist (as Burdin describes himself). However, this act of defamiliarization brings forth the instrumental condition of Burdin’s installation. The shack and the decaying landscape frame Burdin’s central work: a series of video projections. It would be dishonest to say that we are back in the most traditional concept of pictorial art as defined by the dialectic between frame and content, since here is an effort to create a parallel between the installation and the video, or as the Whitney catalogue puts it, to achieve the “age-old goal of the avant-garde: the coincidence of art and life”.*(1) It is also insincere, however, to make facile references to the rawness of the shack, as if it were an uninhabited structure that can be occupied or appropriated at will. The shack has become an object of fancy, a source of metaphors for mediated society abundant of objects – and lacking in life. Burdin’s installation, situated in the generic rather than specific, is ambivalent. Is it a sign of precariousness or are these simply aesthetic forms? The ambiguity of the image testifies to the extent to which the tactics of resistance coupled with the return to the concrete have been domesticated.

In 2003, the Slovenian artist Marjetica Potrc presented an installation titled *Caracas: Growing House* at the Global Navigational Systems exhibition in the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.*(2) This project was the offspring of Potrc’s engagement with the *ranchos* (slums) of Caracas, Venezuela, that same year.*(3) Potrc’s onsite Caracas project, *Dry Toilet*, was a multidisciplinary undertaking centered on the failure of the urban infrastructures grids - for water, electricity and sewage - to supply the inhabitants of the slums with services that meet the standards of modern urban living. As with just about any contemporary urban slum or informal settlement in Cairo, Rio or Mumbai, the lack of services prompts inhabitants to solve the daily problems of meeting

their most basic needs. The constant struggle to improve one's living conditions is a source of admiration and awe for those accustomed to the "magic" of industrialization. In such extreme conditions, agency is thus seen in a raw and unmediated state. This type of resourcefulness is generally celebrated, and with the work of Potrc, it has stepped into the galleries of art of most major cities.

With their accession to galleries and museums, works such as Burdin's and Potrc's speak of a new aesthetic moment infatuated with the instant, with the *here today/ gone tomorrow*. As the anthropologist Nestor Garcia Canclini observes, "the hyperreality of the instantaneous" reformulates the idea of the work by severing it from the past and the future. *(4) The admiration of the slums that Potrc brings to the foreground is based on a strange humanism, which solicits compassion (lament) as well as envy (desire), framed by a recent shift in perceiving the slums as urban sores and areas of blight to imagining them as natural and organic growths that re-create "traditional" urban patterns (like medieval urban layouts or Italian hill towns) and as social constructs that recapture a sense of place lost in the "formal" city. *(5) The return to a primitive or anti-industrial stance as a critique of the modern city and of contemporary mediated capitalist culture casts a romantic light on these expressions. Slums counter the homelessness of modern man, becoming objects of fascination, a "therapeutic space" for the bourgeois self. *(6) These nostalgic desires for a lost past or a possible future appear as recurring tropes, as fragmented statements interwoven within the heterogeneous forces that, as Canclini observes, celebrate the present.

Slums cannot, however, be reduced to romantic, antimodern, or idealized characterizations, to vernacular spaces of rural sociability and precapitalist exchanges or microcommunities that escape global capital. A stance that counters the sentimentality of nostalgia is one that sees slums as part of the growing resistance to practices of globalization from below. *(7) Informal constructions (which involve a range of diverse and multiple building practices) are then seen as a survival tactic installed by or within global capital itself after the collapse of the social state. This position is clear in the works of Potrc and others artists who see these expressions as a celebration of "the independent and resourceful individual" who appears across "vast cultural divides". *(8) The overlap between artists' interest and practices and slum dwellers' tactics and actions is premised on a new perception of a shared political engagement that may be productive, but runs the risk of artists appropriating the slum dwellers "otherness" for their own ends. *(9)

The proliferation of what Potrc calls "urban negotiations" – the abundance of *ad hoc* building strategies across the globe – reveals a way of doing and of being in the world. It manifests a practical and inventive human agent who is resourceful with what is presented, be it situations, materials, people, or resources like energy or water. This agent of the instant uses the given world not to re-create the world in his or her own image, since this would be to claim a consistent subject, nor to create a sense of place, for this would be a return to the vernacular, but simply to survive in the world. *(10) What slum dwellers build is displaced by how they build, and how they build is the lesson to be learned. The challenge to artists is then to present not the object but the manner in which these constructions are produced, a manner inseparable from its producer. This active subjectivity can be characterized as that of the *bricoleur*, and his or her way of being in the world, as *bricolage*.

BRICOLAGE

As a symptom of a heterogeneous world, the term *bricolage* suffers from semantic instability. Simply stated, however, *bricolage* is the construction of something from whatever comes at hand. Since its introduction by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *La pensée sauvage* (The savage mind) in 1962, it has appeared across for critical disciplines and discourses as part of the revolution that structuralism posed for critical and creative projects, from poetry to architecture. Lévi-Strauss' examination of *bricolage* is an attempt to challenge the generalized notion of the "intellectual poverty of the Savages", their lack of conceptual thinking, their "ineptitude for abstract thought". Abstraction, as he further states, "is not the monopoly of civilization". However, Lévi-Strauss goes a step further, since with *bricolage* he is not only presenting the "thinking of the savages", but more importantly "savage thinking" or, better yet, to use Dan Sperber's term, "untamed thinking", a thinking other than science – analogic, perhaps, rather than analytic – that, in our contemporary experience, grows out of the void spaces of capital. *(12)

Bricolage is then "other" thinking, grounded in the objects of the world and inseparable from material making. As a process of making with whatever is at hand, it becomes subject and subjected to the material world, to concrete reality. The scientific taxonomic principle – the universal mind of humanity that operates from philosophy to physics – sees no abstract rationality in "primitive" or mythopoetic orders, since it believes them to be governed solely by organic needs, by the immediacy of the body's demands. *(13) In 1821 the British explorer W.E. Parry noted how the inhabitants of the west coast of Baffin Bay (in Eastern Canada), when presented with a new commodity, "immediately licked it twice with their tongues, after which they considered the bargain satisfactory". *(14) This close and immediate link to the concrete material reality, this incapacity to relate to objects through abstractions, is precisely the grounds of the charge of primitivism, that is, of the so-called savages' inability for conceptual thought. Lévi-Strauss challenges such an implicit separation of the material world and conceptual thought because, for him, taxonomy is interwoven with the material world. The licking of the commodity is part of a conceptual structure, a form of association that can be understood as "the science of the concrete".

With Jacques Derrida and poststructuralism, *bricolage* gains in meaning, transformed from a practice bound by concrete objects to a critical form itself. The activity of the *bricoleur* becomes a model for creativity and a critique of dominant culture in general. As Derrida states: "There is... a critique of language in the form of *bricolage*, and it has even been said that *bricolage* is critical language itself." *(15) This overlap between the practice of the *bricoleur*, bound by the everyday, and a general critique of dominant culture as a whole, a theoretical operation performed by specialist, I will call *the function of bricolage*. The function of *bricolage*, then is a critique of logocentric culture itself, since discourse, as Derrida states, does not arrive "out of nothing". For contemporary theory, all discourse is *bricolage*.

But can the *bricoleur* be critical? If there is any glimmer of criticality in the practice of *bricolage*, as identified by Lévi-Strauss, it is not in its intention of being critical, but in its "free-play". *(16) Critically defines a new limit that inserts *bricolage* within capital, enabling critique but, at the same time, transforming *bricolage*, since it must abandon free-play and nonproductivity as its ends. If free-play, as Derrida argues,

is the open possibility of nontotalization, the new criticality of *the bricolage function* is its negative possibility, that which makes it productive. This is the core of the postmodern understanding and use of *bricolage*, and the difference between the notion of the open work and our present infatuation with the instant.

What I am calling *the function of bricolage* prevails in postmodern cultural criticism as a critical, self-reflexive activity. It refers *the practice of bricolage* back to a center (criticality) – thus making it an instrumental practice. In this the *function of bricolage* supersedes the *bricoleur* and his or her practice by putting forward the figure of the critical practitioner. We are far from Lévi-Strauss' formulation, which does not fuse the *bricoleur* and the engineer. This new subjectivity – the critical practitioner – is a central figure in architectural practice from the 1960s onward.

This new level of productivity penetrated architectural discourses as part of the commerce of ideas that underlines postmodern culture. For Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, who claimed the activity of *bricolage* for architecture in *Collage City* (1978), *bricolage* was more “the real-life specification of what the architect-urbanist is and does than any fantasy deriving from ‘methodology’ and ‘systemics’”. *(17) However, Rowe and Koetter feared “that the architect as ‘*bricoleur*’ is today too enticing a programme – a programme which might guarantee formalism, ad hocery, townscape pastiche, populism, and almost whatever else one chooses to name.” *(18) The architect must remain in an intermediate position between the engineer and the *bricoleur*. In this way, Rowe and Koetter are simply appropriating for architecture the figure of the artist who, as described by Lévi-Strauss himself, was capable of acting within “savage” *ad hoc* circumstances as well as scientific idealities of large-scale systems. But why is it that for Rowe and Koetter the architect cannot be a *bricoleur*? This is because architecture is concerned with amelioration, with “making things better, with how things ought to be”, not with how they are. Although the problems architecture tries to correct cannot be resolved simply with an “empirical theory of facts”, they cannot be solved with *bricolage* either. *(19)

The architect-artist makes *bricolage*, the practice of the *bricoleur*, a productive social force. *(20) This important yet almost imperceptible shift between the practice empirically analyzed by Lévi-Strauss (*bricolage*) and what I am calling the *bricolage function* is clear in *Collage City*. *Bricolage* becomes a tool that is used by the architect-artist to disarm the discursive machinery of modern architecture. The use of *bricolage* a strategy against modernity is the calling card of a critical practitioner.

It is telling that Rowe and Koetter avoid slums all together when addressing the question of *bricolage*. *(21) For both, *bricolage* is grounded in the history of architecture – in imperial Roman architecture – which they see as “the accumulation of set-pieces in collision”. With examples like Hadrian's Villa or Rome itself, Rowe and Koetter introduce an important observation central to the understanding of *bricolage*: the notion of creative activity as a temporally extended event. Historical works “built by several people and different times” manifest a practice that goes against the structured rationality of a scientific insistence on totality and completeness. *(22) For Rowe and Koetter, *bricolage* in architecture assumes the form of an event, more temporal than material. *Bricolage* here appears solely as a figure or instrument against the modernist indictment of history, and not a practice that questions architecture or the figure of the architect himself. *(23)

Contemporary “critical practices” like that of New York based architectural firm LOT-EK exhibit similar concerns. Instead of the debris of historical forms, LOT-EK uses industrial “debris” as its referential palette. *(24) Found and readymade objects presents a “slash-and-re-tool-architecture” that, as Todd Alden points out, is not “recycling, nor it it the art of assemblage”, rather, it is industrial “*bricolage*”.*(25) The resourcefulness, inventiveness, hands-on, do-it-yourself working process- at least for small projects like Guzman Penthouse (1996), which uses shipping containers to transform a mechanical room on a Manhattan rooftop – reveal the practice of *bricolage* in the hands of architectural professionals. The intensification of time guides this “*industrial bricolage*” since most if not all of its material practices and forms are determined by time-cost considerations. This condition does not preclude singular works. The humor in projects like *The Mixer* – an installation in the Henry Urbach Gallery (2000) that transformed a new steel concrete mixer into a twenty-first century, self-contained, two-person media capsule – recovers a sense of free-play that was lost in Rowe and Koetter’s use of *bricolage*. These fabrications recall appropriations of industrial and commercial products – like that of vending machines to dispense art by Clark Whittington (1997) – that recuperate the sense of free-play by going beyond professional boundaries. *(26) LOT-EK’s use of prefabricated industrial objects – shipping containers – allows the firm to move away from professional methods and into the realm of *bricolage* practices, since, as Alden enthusiastically points out. “almost all of the building materials (for the Guzman Penthouse) were found on the streets” *(27) The shipping container, a privileged form used by LOT-EK, is not, however, found in slums.*(28) To characterize industrial overproduction as debris may be a powerful metaphor, but it homogenizes different fields of objects by stressing materiality. Overproduction does not render objects equivalent. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that LOT-EK’s use of industrial containers modifies the methods of architectural practice, forcing *another way of doing*. This renewal takes the form of a material pragmatism that, attacking formal languages, move away from theory and toward making.

Where Lévi-Strauss’s science of the concrete resolved around the mythopoetic organization of the world by “primitive” societies, Michel de Certeau’s definition of the “practice of everyday life” recasts the concrete as poetics of “productive consumption”.*(29) De Certeau’s notion of creative consumption allows the function of *bricolage* to permeate all practices, enabling consumption as a creative cultural critique. The quest for positive or emancipatory forces of capital should not blur the boundaries between the pleasure of consumption and the need to consume. The permeable barrier that separates these two forms of consumption does not necessarily mean that they can be collapsed into one. The construction of marginality is perhaps one of the single most important ideas that traverses the entire discussion of *bricolage*. Slum dwellers may act like consumers, but they remain unstable subjects of consumption. The notion of productive consumption that constructs a homogeneous consumer fails, as mentioned above in the case of LOT-EK, to establish clear lines between fields of objects; more important, it fails to distinguish between elites and “common” people. These lines have to be constantly reexamined, since we find elite social structures even in slums.

Hidden in every material object, within a generalized system of repression, is a soft emancipation, an “escape without leaving”.*(30) This is why objects become possible critical players in the world and why *bricolage* has become a necessary function for all disciplines that claim any critical stance. The consumer’s “making”, de Certeau’s

productive consumption, “does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its *ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order”.*(31) This assertion assumes a world of objects that fall dangerously close to the rubric of consumer goods (of industrial overproduction, as in the case of LOT-EK) and not to that of materials. (The slippage here is from making to ways of using.) For De Certeau, the world of productive consumption is expressed, for example, in the collections of bric-a-brac in suburban homes; but what happens when the bric-a-brac of industrial overproduction and consumer waste is used to construct the house itself? As Lévi-Strauss states, “The balance between structure and event, necessity and contingency, the internal and external is a precarious one.” *(32) Precariousness defines the lives of those *consumers* who live in slums. That is why we must be hypervigilant when the material traces of these lives appear in museums and galleries.

IMAGES AND NARRATIVES

In Potrc’s view, slums dwellings “convey a single message...They are dwellings and nothing else.”*(33) The insistence on the pragmatics of shelter reinforces material pragmatism. Potrc’s installations, following slum construction, work with a full breadth of materials. One confronts a piece like *Caracas: Growing House* as an object in its full, tangible, material complexity: brick, concrete, wood, corrugated metal, plastic and metal tubing, cardboard, and tarps, to name just a few primary materials. We are grounded again in a concrete reality. However, the pragmatics of materials open the work to narrative forms, to an account (or image) of someone’s struggle. The reliance on narrative strategies (a temporal construction) goes back to Potrc’s early works, like *Theatrum Mundi* (1993). The multiple textures, colors, materials and narratives in similar projects like *Hybrid House* – where Potrc juxtaposes slum structures from Caracas, the West Bank and West Palm Beach (a mobile home) as a part of the Urgent Architecture exhibition (2003) – celebrates *bricolage* as a form of agency.*(34) The combination of the different fragments, the adding up of structures “like the never-ending cities of the contemporary world”*(35) expresses a proliferation of narratives, the burgeoning voices that, capturing the idea of a contestatory culture, challenge the dominant discourse through its own material debris.

The narratives transported by Potrc’s into a museum context point to one of the central problems faced by artists invoking the world of slums: as the Other is brought into the gallery, a new totality is constructed that runs the risk of becoming a transcendental image detached from its local reality. Works by Potrc, Burdin, and artists such as Jesús Palomino (Spain), Carlos Garaicoa (Cuba), Grupo Grafito (Colombia), Franklin Cassaro (Brazil), Meyer Vaisman (Venezuela) and Felix Schramm (Germany) have sought to negotiate this tension through different devices. Vaisman’s *Verde por fuera, rojo por dentro* (Green on the outside, Red on the inside), for example, is one-room brick structure “torn” from the hillside slums of Caracas and located within the 1993 Sao Paulo Biennial. In order to prevent the work becoming little more than an image, the artist chose to “wrap” his installation in a series of performances that lasted a week. *(36) These rituals ward off the pictorial realm and bring back the everyday. Rituals reintroduce the *ad hoc* condition of the piece; without these it is condemned to contemplation. In the case of Potrc, the problem of relying on narratives is that these are susceptible to totalizations, to the staging of the other.

Jesús Palomino addresses the same issue in works like *Casa del Poble Nou* (House in Poble Nou, 1998), an installation placed in a open lot in a rapidly changing area of Barcelona, or in the exhibiton *Ciudad Multiple City*, in Panama (2003), where he built *ad hoc* structures in the dense, urbanized areas of the “formal city”. *Casa del Poble Nou* is made of light materials, painted in bright colours (light blue and brilliant yellow), and the one-room shack, like many others of Palomino’s structures, lacks doors and it thus open to anyone. Inside, one finds traces of habitation: a stool, some sheets, a wooden shipping pallet. These objects, however, are signifiers of habitation rather than traces of living. What makes Palomino’s urban installations different from slum shacks is neither the sites in which he builds them nor their materiality – since he builds with the same materials slum dwellers use: plastic, wood and cardboard. More significantly, Palomino differs in the manner of construction. He intensifies the fragile nature of this form of shelter by introducing paper as a construction material and underscoring the weakness of wood and cardboard, stressing their thinness. He exaggerates the precariousness of building techniques by revealing the weakness of joints. Palomino plays with the precarious condition of materials, construction techniques and space itself. His constructions are allusions to shelter, rather than shelter itself. When these installations are done inside a gallery, as in the *Casa de Alejandro Sales* (House of Alejandro Sales, 1998), *Bahnhof Haus* (Train Station House, 2002) or *Mercado Ligeró Esperando* (Light Market Waiting, 2002), the structures become so flimsy, the materials so thin, the space so undefined – lacking walls and roofs that would contain its spatiality – that they become mere signs. One is freed from the enchanting aesthetic or the compelling inventiveness of slums themselves. Most notably, Palomino, is able to make clear references to slums without excising an ethnographic sample. *(37)

Palomino’s play with precariousness was tested when he was invited to Douala, in Cameroon, to build an installation in Bessengue, one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city. For his contribution to the *Bessengue City Project*, organized by Goody Leye in 2002, Palomino (working with Hartanto Eko and the South African artist James Beckett) built a permanent structure for the first radio station run by the people in the neighborhood. *(38) Palomino tackled the requirements of shelter with a large roof that protruded from a semi-open radio booth, drawing on sturdier building techniques and materials than those he normally used. At a quick glance, the differences may not be easily noticed. Built from wood and translucent corrugated-fiberglass sheets, the large roof presented Palomino’s interest in colour and *ad hoc* forms, but unlike his other works, this construction was built with new materials (sheet of plywood and two-by-fours) instead of scavenged ones. It also mobilized effective building techniques like cross-bracing – a technique absent in *Casa del Poble Nou* - and was built on a foundation, unlike his previous structures, which simply sat directly on the ground. These elements position this construction-installation closer to Portc on-site projects, like the 2002 House for Travellers, built for a family of refugees who live in Ljubljana. *(39)

Palomino’s Bessengue structure allowed people to gather. Precariousness was abandoned in favour of a communal space, the only one in the neighbourhood. This important shift away from his installations, which allude to domesticity, to a construction that enables a communal sphere to emerge, points to the artist’s critical stance. Poor neighborhoods rarely have communal spaces, and one of the characteristics of slums is that they have no communal, much less public, spaces. Slums are landscapes

of individuality. Palomino then took a stance that moved his work closer to social activism.

SLUMS

The debate on slums has traditionally been dominated by the social sciences and the development agencies and organizations; so the shift to a cultural arena, as in the case of the works sponsored by *Urban Think Tank* in Caracas between 2002 and 2004, of which Potrc's work is part, represents a new perspective on the role of the artist. With these interdisciplinary teams, *bricolage* is taken as a model of hybrid practice that disarms disciplinary behaviours. If the *bricoleur-engineer* dichotomy is questioned in the flux of heterogeneity, it is only because the figure of the artist acquires a central position; in the end, all professionals have become artists.

For Potrc and Liyat Esakov, the Israeli architect she worked with, the issue is one of infrastructures. Onsite projects like Potrc's Dry Toilet present a powerful, exhilarating, and physically exhausting engagement with social, economic and cultural realities that reveal new and subtle forms of knowledge based on onsite actions. Low-tech techniques – the use of basic materials, the compact (or miniature, in Lévi-Strauss's words) nature of the projects, the densely woven social structures – create consistent urban textures. This overlap between site and technique creates two contradictory yet interdependent forces. First, these urban texture are romantically transformed into traditional community formations. Second, contextual actions are celebrated as forms of agency. These projects are caught in pragmatic ideologies that follow neoliberal strategies based on the celebration of individualism, an individualism that is seen as the grounds of community. These two ways of disciplining the world of the slums revert to assemblage that demand the figures of both the scientist and the *bricoleur*. Here lies the need for the figure of the artist and the reason disciplinary formations need to be abandoned. In *Dry Toilet*, which concentrates on the problem of water by identifying the toilet as “the thirstiest part of the house”, Potrc proposes a dry toilet, a low-tech composting solution developed by Dr. Nguyen Dang Duc in Vietnam in the 1960s. *(40) The artist becomes scientist.

This shift has important repercussions in Potrc's gallery installations, where she adopts the role of an ethnographer who visits other lands to collect objects for her work. She certainly benefits from recent critical re-examinations in ethnographic fieldwork that blur the difference between doing fieldwork and gathering data. *(41) The idea of fieldwork as a performative act, a “doing” deeply embedded in representation and interpretation, allows for an easy slippage from the art of fieldwork to fieldwork as art. The slippage is productive, and artists such as Mark Dion, who engages “archaeological” fieldwork in *New England Digs* (2002) and *Tate Thames Digs* (1999), or Andrea Fraser, whose sociological fieldwork in the art world culminated in *Untitled* (2003), where she videotaped herself having sex with a collector, engage scientific postures (the interest in classification, analysis, examination) that appears as “the real thing” to unmask the narrative fictions of traditional scientific discourses. As diverse as these practices are, they share a common root: the work is defined by a disciplinary ontology – the work is art because artist do it – that is put into crisis to make it epistemologically productive and thus avoid simple commoditization.

To dabble in the field of the social sciences can be a productive engagement for an artist. Nonetheless, the adoption of this new role is not necessarily a critical practice in itself. When Potrc engages the world of the slums, she presents it as an anthropological fact, but of what? Her “cases studies”, as she calls her work, contribute to her survey of the expressions of independent and resourceful individuals. The attempt to reconstruct the complexity of social relations, an anthropological desire, somehow falls short when presented in the gallery. This is not because of the nature of the object itself but, rather, because, Potrc’s anthropological gaze is imbued with an ideology of individualism that puts these expressions to work, making them socially productive. This leads to an act of normalization that makes these marginal urban developments “consciously seek independence from city or state grids and so make visible a new balance between individuals and society.”*(42) It could be argued that within this new balance the individual is not antithetical to society, that the struggle between the haves and the have-nots can be mediated by the market. However, works like those by Potrc reveal that the symbolic value of slums is too dear to be left untapped, to be abandoned to those who produce it. Rarely, in these revelations of the human condition – as Potrc likes to characterize her work – do we hear individual names. In *Caracas: Growing House* the representation of the real is somehow voided of what is most real about it: the people who actually build and live in these structures.

For us to gain access to this symbolic capital, for us to possess it, it has to be normalized, to be made part of the dominant social imaginary. This act of domestication is eloquently captured in the term “urban negotiations”, an expansion of the sociological and anthropological critical category of negotiation. However, the tension between negotiation – human activities as a set of specific events in which artistic improvisation is possible – and the urban, which brings to the foreground an overdetermined set of conditions, is not resolved. The shift from a “subject defined in terms of economic relation to one defined in terms of cultural identity” – as Hal Foster described it -*(43) needs to be re-examined in terms of reincorporation of the Other in the field of productive labour. Potrc’s insistence on seeing slums as examples of the triumph of individualism strikingly echoes neoliberal postures such as those that propose to integrate slums into the world of capitalist urban negotiations.**(44)

According to Potrc, the impossibility of extending the city’s infrastructural grids into the slums makes inhabitants of slums seek independence. The elevation of the real is grounded in a pragmatic economic measure and reinforced by the construction of personal local epics. The narrative structure that help construct an alterity for the works (both onsite and in galleries) and which still carries a measure of contestation is domesticated. Narratives, which for artists like Vaisman help to connect the work to everyday, common experience, are now at the service of the prevailing discourse of personal initiatives and freedoms. This type of myth-building hides the collapse of the political sphere and divests the state (and society) of any responsibility for this collapse. These projects and installations claim to reveal and promote active agents, while accepting the very impossibility of social action.

Potrc returns to the space of art by excising the *Dry Toilet* from its context. This type of “transplant”, as Potrc refers to her projects, operates by reducing objects to signs – like a satellite dish “which stands for communication”.**(45) The reduction has deeper repercussions. If *Dry Toilet* (the onsite project) is fueled by the “hyperreality of the instantaneous”, this condition becomes inoperative when grounded in the space of

the gallery. *Dry Toilet* as a product of agency is transformed, in *Caracas: Growing House*, into a sign of agency. As a sign, it is inserted into the networks of power of which the gallery is a node. Potrc's recognition of the disenfranchised communities is based on a surgical operation that, in the end, allows an essentialist perspective to overtake any form of *bricolage*. Homogeneity sets in: shelter, water and communication become the natural categories of the postindustrial subject. "This is the same for everyone, for shantytown dwellers, as well as for the most affluent populations."*(46) This homogeneity would not be a problem if such transplants, like *Caracas: Growing House*(2003), *Hybrid House: Caracas, Wets Bank, West Palm Beach* (2003) and *Xapuri: Rural School* (presented in Sao Paulo in 2006), were not consistently read as emancipatory statements, as "individual statements" that range from squatter cooperatives to private, gated communities and "threaten the authority of corporate and government-managed public space."*(47) Putting aside facile statements that equate the social reality of slum dwellers with that of affluent, Potrc is correct in identifying the homogeneous space of postindustrial capital. She is naive, however, about the incorporation of shantytowns into the mapping systems of power as a form of emancipation. One can trace the operation of power in her work by considering how construction tactics born in the shantytowns become building strategies (incorporated by architectural practices like that of LOT-EF). One can also point to case studies deployed by power, like that Moshe Safdie's *Olympic Village* in Montréal (1976) or the latest and very successful *Elemental International Social Housing Competition* (2003) organized by Alejandro Aravena in Santiago, Chile.*(48)

The discursive presentation of "real" places has displaced the idealist space of dominant modernism and brought experience – the "sensorial immediacy of spatial extension and temporal duration" – to the center.*(49) As Miwon Kwon argues, conceptual engagement with physical sites led to a broader discursive site-specificity. In the context of Potrc's work, the narratives about the slums have domesticated them. I do not object so much to the brilliant colours with which Potrc generally presents her transplants, sheltered structures that have never suffered from the demands of weather, time or violence from either inhabitants or the state. But the sheltering of shelter, this densification process with Potrc is so enamored, extracts all life from the *events* of actual physical shelter. In these delicate transplants, life must be preserved but sterilized.

This impoverishment has an ideological core: I have yet to walk through one of these installations where the smell of the slums is actually present. The inodorous condition of these transplants reveals their bourgeois ideation – for smell is first associated with the stench of urine and feces, not with the fragrance of food. For a world that sees *bricolage* simply as the commerce of contemplative experiences or as a tool for critique, the stench of the slums has to be excised. If these forms are to serve as signs of agency, they need to be transfigured, made into consumable images. The transformation must be minimal or disguised, however, since, like a drug addict who needs to increase the dose, bourgeois living needs ever-stronger forms of "real" life.

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NOTES:

*(1) Chrissie Iles, Philippe Vergne and Tony Burlap. Introduction to *Day for Night*, exh. Cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, Abrams, 2006), 188.

*(2) The work is part of her on going gallery installation grouped together as *Contemporary Building Strategies*. See www.Potrc.org / project.htm.

*(3) The project was part of the Caracas Case Project of the *Urban Think Tank* (a German-funded Caracas-based NGO).

*(4) Nestor Garcia Canclini, "Aesthetic Moments of Latin Americanism", *Radical History Review* 89 (Spring 2004): 19.

*(5) See David Gouverneur and Oscar Grauer, "To Ignore or to Integrate? On the Barrios of Caracas", *Harvard Design Magazine*, Summer 1999, 47-49.

*(6) See Lucy R. Lippard, "*The Lure of the Local: Senses of place in a Multicentered Society*" (New York: New Press, 1997)

*(7) See Jeremy Brecher, Tim Costello and Brendan Smith, "*Globalization from Below: The Power of Solidarity*" (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000)

*(8) Marjetica Potrc, "*Five Ways to Urban Independence*" in Marjetica Potrc: Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, 22.V-7.IX, 2003 (aka Urban Negotiation), exh. Cat., ed. Ana Maria Torres (Valencia: Institut Valencià d'Art Modern 2003), 26.

*(9) For an examination of the issues of the coalition between these two groups see Anna Deuze, "*Thriving on Adversity: The Art of Precariousness*", *Mute* 2, n° 3, special issue on "*Naked Cities: Struggle on the Global Slums*" (October 2006): 74-87, available online at www.metamute.org/en/Thriving/on/Adversity.

*(10) See Miwon Kwon's critique of Lippard's *Lure of the Local* in "*The Wrong Place*", *Art Journal* 59, n. 1 (Spring 2000): 32-43.

*(11) Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1966), I.

*(12) Dan Sperber, "Claude Lévi-Strauss", in *Structuralism and Since: From Claude Lévi-Strauss to Derrida*, ed. And intro. John Sturrock (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1979), 27.

*(13) Lévi-Strauss, 3.

*(14) Sir William Edward Parry, “*Journal of a voyage for the discovery of a north-west passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific: Performed in the years 1819-20*”, in His Majesty’s ship Hecla, under the orders of William Edward Parry, R.N., F.R.S., and commander of the expedition: with an appendix, containing the scientific and other observations (London: John Murray, 1821), 278.

*(15) Jacques Derrida, “*Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*” in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 285.

*(16) Derrida elaborates the notion of free-play in “*Structure, Sign and Play...*”

*(17) Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978), 104.

*(18) *Ibid.*, 105.

*(19) *Ibid.*

*(20) The artist’s productive act is implicit in his or her critique of scientific (rational) knowledge through a different organization of the world.

*(21) Five years before their “postmodernism manifesto”, as Joan Ockman has called *Collage City*, Charles Jencks has included the *barriadas*, or squatters settlements in Peru, with their ad hoc arrangements, in his book, *Modern Movements in Architecture* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1973).

*(22) Rowe and Koetter, 93.

*(23) Derrida accurately reveals professional consistency as a myth; however, this myth has acquired concrete forms.

*(24) This use harkens back to the modernist infatuation with machinery.

*(25) Todd Alden, “*LOT-EK: industrial bricolage*” *Graphis* 59, n. 347 (September-October 2003): 54-70. For more on the firm, see www.lot-ek.com/.

*(26) See www.artomat.org for details of Whittington’s project.

*(27) Alden, 57.

*(28) For a history of the container, see Arthur Donovan and Joseph Bonney, “*The box that Changed the World: Fifty years of Container Shipping. An Illustrated History*” (East Windsor, NJ: Commonwealth Business Media, 2006).

*(29) For De Certeau, productive consumption has its ground zero speech in the constant appropriation and reappropriation of language by common people. With this, *bricolage* moves from the material culture of the french *bricoleur* to a world where the act of speaking becomes the paradigm form of personal agency and emancipation. However, language is not the only form of *bricolage*, since De Certeau recognizes others *bricolage* practices – like walking and cooking. See Michel de Certeau,

“*The Practice of Everyday Life*”, trans. Steven F. Rendall (1974; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

*(30) Ibid., xiii.

*(31) Ibid. (italics in origin).

*(32) Lévi-Strauss, 30.

*(33) Marjetica Potrc, “*Vacant House*”, Marjetica Potrc, 96.

*(34) See Eleanor Heartney, “*House of Parts*”, *Art in America*, May 2004, 140-143.

*(35) Potrc, “*Theatrum Mundi*” in Marjetica Potrc, 72.

*(36) Josefina Ayerza, “*Meyer Vaisman*”, *Flash Art* 28, n. 182 (May-June 1955): 101.

*(37) For more about Palomino, see Francisco del Río, “*Jesús Palomino: Casas, vallas publicitarias y túneles*” (Seville: Caja de San Fernando, 2003). // www.jesuspalomino.com //

*(38) For pictures and a short description, see www.r-a-i-n.net / workshop / projects, (accessed June 18, 2007)

*(39) See www.potrc.org / project 2. htm

*(40) Marjetica Potrc and Liyat Esakov, “*Growing House-Growing City*”, in Alfredo Brillembourg, Kristin Feireiss and Hubert Klumpner, *Informal City: Caracas Case* (Munich and New York: Prestel, 2005), 183. For information in Spanish on The Dry Toilet, see www.evolucionlibre.net / article.php / sanitario-ecologico-seco (accessed June 5, 2007)

*(41) See, for example, Harry F. Wolcott, “*The Art of Fieldwork*”, 2nd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press 2005)

*(42) Brillembourg et al., 26.

*(43) Hal Foster, “*The Artist as Ethnographer*” in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 173.

*(44) See, for example, the work of the Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto.

*(45) Potrc, quoted in “*Interview with Marjetica Potrc*”, in Marjetica Potrc, 194.

*(46) Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, “*Marjetica Potrc: Hugo Boss Prize 2000*”, exh. Brochure, available online at www.guggenheim.org / html (accessed June 15, 2007)

*(48) For a brief review of the context and resolution of the Santiago project, see Julian Dowling, “*Chile’s New Social Housing Policy*”, available online at www.businesschile.cl/portada.php.w=old&id=332&lan=en (accessed July 16, 2007)

*(49) Miwon Kwon, "*One Place After Another*", *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 86. See also her *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA:MIT Press, 2002)