



Cynthia Marcelle
Fountain 193 / Fonte 193,
2007
Video, colour, sound
version 5.0
12'

Crusade / Cruzada, 2010
Video, colour, sound
8'36" loop

to come to / 475 Volver,
2009
Video, colour, sound
8'08" loop



The associations with the Cartesian order and the first traces of the modernist plan for the utopian city are soon dissolved (or are they confirmed?) by the absurd events about to unfold in Marcelle's film. The camera, placed several metres above the cross, at a slight angle from what would be the Z axis, captures the absurd theatre of one military parade after another – there are four altogether – marching along each axis. Meeting at the middle, they then retrace their steps, only to return to encounter their opposite numbers (or fellow travellers?) once again.

We might search for a political subtext here, but how useful or meaningful would that be? It seems more interesting to look instead for a particular series of conjunctions that the artist sets in play. The background is cut across by the first traces of so-called civilisation, which is then populated by those stereotypical markers of the civilising drive, military order, uniforms, music. It is a scene that is pathetic, comic and tragic all at the same time, yet it may not be as absurd as it seems. The cross is, after all, the place where offerings to the Afro-Brazilian gods are placed. Seen from this perspective, the Christian or logocentric reference is replaced, turned upside down, or at the very least syncretised by the conjunction of references.

In another film, *475 Volver* (*to come to*, 2009), a bulldozer opens up a dirt road not dissimilar to the ones described above, but now it forms a figure of eight, arranged across the screen as the mathematical symbol of infinity. It alternates from side to side, taking earth from one circle and depositing it on the other, then repeating the manoeuvre in reverse. Once again, the order of absolute mathematical logic contrasts with the utter pointlessness of the scene. In yet another film, *Fonte 193* (*Fountain 193*, 2007), a fire engine empties its water-tank into the centre of a circle of its own making. It revolves around the circumference until the ground is so saturated with water it shines against the dark matt-red earth while making the trajectory of the truck difficult to maintain. As with the bulldozer in *Volver*, the monochromatic red earth of the background locates the scene as somewhere in the central region of Brazil. In

these films the monochrome – not necessarily white or black – seems to be significant as a starting point, a stage on which the artist builds the scene.

In *Volta ao Mundo (Round the World, 2004)*, a roundabout is filmed from an apartment in the upper floors of what seems to be a residential tower block. The roundabout is elegant, its mature trees making it resemble a small park that embellishes the neighbourhood. Pedestrians use it to cross to the other side of the highway or as a place to linger, walking their dogs and so forth. A bus comes to a halt and drops passengers off. Cars circumnavigate the roundabout, negotiating the momentarily stopped bus. The cross of a church can be seen hanging from a modern building only partially visible towards the right-hand side of the screen. One by one Volkswagen Kombis enter the circle until eight of them drive around the roundabout continually without exiting it, making it almost but not entirely impassable to other traffic. Whereas in the UK Kombis are most often thought of as camper vans, in Brazil they are rarely, almost never, used for camping. Instead, they are used as minibuses and grocery delivery vans, as well as for a variety of other small-scale businesses, even if the Brazilian VW production line ceased manufacturing them many years ago. During the 1970s my father used to drive one in the interior of the state of São Paulo; it had a Bible that he had painted himself across the front door, suggesting his trade was the transportation of souls. Perhaps it is this personal recollection, combined with the cross on the church and the fact that in Marcelle's film the Kombis are all white, that suggested to me that these could be ambulances – another common former use of the vehicle. This could be my memory playing a trick on me since I once hit my face against the Kombi's metal panel when my father crashed into another car, a subconscious relation between accident and emergency perhaps.

Whatever the case, in Marcelle's film the Kombis circle the roundabout leaving just enough space for other cars to join them from time to time. The vision is reminiscent of a giant cog going around the roundabout pulling the other cars into its drive and pushing

Cinthia Marcelle

*Round the World / Volta
ao Mundo, 2004*
Video, colour, sound
16'29"



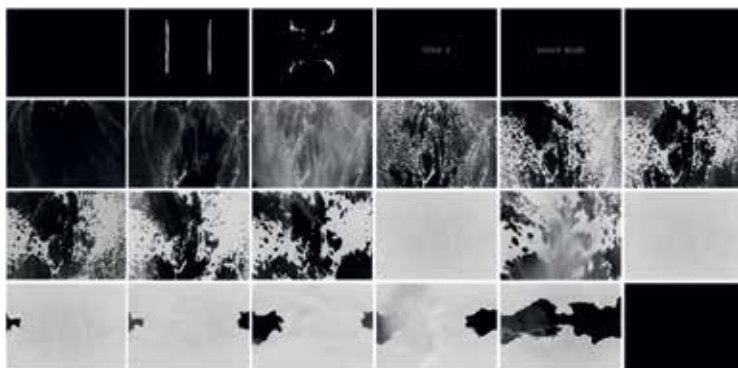
them out again, making that particular view of the city reveal itself metaphorically as part of a larger machine. In the most unexpected way, one is reminded of Francis Picabia's paintings of the early 20th century. In *Round the World* it is the city that becomes a libidinal machine, the roundabout a planet, the Kombis its satellites. All these associations are displayed under the Cartesian logic of one plane, which is mirrored by the cross on the other. The film ends with a single Kombi returning, unaware of the strange spectacle that has just taken place, announcing its promotions, groceries and produce grown from the earth.

These films by Marcelle have certain common characteristics. Set against the symbolic potential of diverse backgrounds, the actors perform the unexpected. The military band, the bulldozer, the fire engine, the ambulance or the small trader, have all been subjected to the absurdity of imposed tasks, defying the purpose of their design. It is a defiance that takes place not through contradiction *per se* but by exaggeration, by excess.

In 2009, Marcelle came to London as a resident artist at Gasworks Studios. The residency was sponsored by the Research Centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation at the University of the Arts London (UAL). As part of that residency she was invited to produce an exhibition at Camberwell College of Arts, one of the colleges within UAL. For the occasion, she proposed a new installation, *This Same World Over* (2009), that at the time seemed to me to invoke Jean Vigo's seminal film *Zéro de Conduite* (1933). The association was of course entirely of my own making. In discussing these connections with Marcelle while she worked on the maquette for the installation, images of misbehaving boarding-school children revolting against those exerting power over them merged with recollections of my own school days and a student occupation at the art college that had taken place a few years prior to Marcelle's arrival. Such discussions led to another work, *R=O (Homage to M.A.)* (2009), also presented on the occasion of her exhibition at Camberwell, which featured a school chair in apparent levitation. A sheet of paper on the wall gave instructions as to how to create the illusion.

Marcelle's process during the installation of the exhibition certainly disrupted the art college. A cloud of white dust covered the entire entrance to the building, its residues spread across the entire campus. The college receptionist could hardly disguise her anger behind her breathing mask. The main installation consisted of a giant blackboard, some nine metres or so in length. A false wall had to be constructed in order to allow such a vast structure while also creating a smaller enclosed space behind it, where another of Marcelle's films, *Buraco Negro (Black Hole, 2008)*, was projected onto the floor. The film presented a black background with white powder that was dispersed on the breath of two people outside the frame: a love story perhaps that now seemed to double up as a conversation between the exhibition and the institution.

Traces of writing could be perceived beneath the erased surface of the blackboard that constituted the exhibition's central piece, *This Same World Over*. The mountains of chalk power, as the receptionist would undoubtedly agree, suggested excess. Indeed, the entire structure presented itself as the aftermath of a strange event, a mad lecture perhaps. The installation had a cinematic character in this sense, one evoking the site of a drama, that while being inconceivable, and precisely because of this, stimulated the imagination all the more. The question of site is also pertinent to this work, if subtly deployed. When the installation was presented the following year at the São Paulo Biennial, it gained far greater notoriety yet it lost its relation to site, becoming something else, a contemporary artwork interpreted as dealing with issues about education in general and perhaps formal questions of scale. This was nevertheless a work that was conceived for an art school. The blackboard stood incongruously amidst its setting, like the vehicles in the previously described films performing tasks at odds with their designed function. It stood there as if representing a form of education that was absolutely other to that of an art school, in this sense speaking to and about the college as an institution. If its production tested the limits of what was permissible within that site,



Cynthia Marcelle and
Tiago Mata Machado

Black Hole / Buraco Negro,
2008
Video, 4'41" loop



sometimes going beyond them, for the students and other viewers it transformed the most traditional school apparatus into a radical gesture. It erased the stereotype of formal education, presenting it instead as a field of possibilities, a carnivalesque act. Past and present, formal and experimental, were thus conjoined within the two-dimensional structure of the erased blackboard and the immensurable, overflowing chalk powder invading the floor, taking over the gallery space.

These characteristics – of carnivalesque reversal, site-specificity at an institutional level and a general tendency to play with the expected functions of things or people – reappeared within Marcelle's installation *The Family in Disorder* (2018) at Modern Art Oxford.

As I walked through it, I confess that at first I read this installation as a political commentary on the current state of the Brazilian nation. The family in the title could, for example, serve as quite an appropriate description of the President's own. It is tempting to think of this work as a configuration of 'order and process'. The denomination refers to the conception of the work and through a play on words invokes the slogan on the Brazilian flag, Order and Progress, itself appropriated from Auguste Comte's definition of positivism. Multiple readings such as these are possible but here it might be more productive to focus on Marcelle's process in relation to the works previously discussed.

The visitor is led through a first gallery space that can be best described as total chaos. Slowly one begins to realise that there is a certain consistency within the materials employed: chalk, bricks, paper, soil, sticky-tape, string, and so forth. A dark carpet covers most of the gallery floor, not quite framing the anarchic structure. As the visitor continues the tour, they arrive at a final room. The dark carpet is immediately identifiable only now it reaches the edges of the slightly smaller space. The room is divided in two by a low barrier. Upon inspection it soon becomes obvious that the barrier is composed of the same materials used in the previous space, now ordered and arranged in their respective packages, neatly aligned one



Cinthia Marcelle
*Truth or Dare / Verdade
ou Desafio, 2018*
Video, colour, sound,
6' loop
Installation view,
Modern Art Oxford

against the other. Marcelle offers viewers a vision of the aftermath of an event only then to present them with the moment before that event took place. Both rooms were initially identically arranged, the smaller carpet in the first room actually delineating the area of the second room.

There are clear associations with other artists – the use of ready-mades and so forth – but to invoke such art historical precedents would be to detract from the process the artist is clearly interested in. Suffice to say that there is an obvious use of contemporary art vernacular but to dwell on this only detracts from the work as an event: an event still left to our imagination, framed between two given moments in time. Some vital information concerning it is nevertheless provided. A carnivalesque reversal once again emerges upon the realisation that the dismantling of the orderly line of materials in the first room and its chaotic re-assembly was offered as a task to six artists, who also work as the gallery's technicians. The institution turns itself inside out, offers us its guts so to speak, as those in charge of the safety and protection of the work of art turn out to be the very same people who created it. The hierarchical pyramid is reversed but within the cinematic logic of the work it is the artist who determines the time between action and cut.

Image credits

The Family in Disorder / A Família em Desordem
Modern Art Oxford
10 March – 27 May 2018
Cinthia Marcelle with the participation of Aaron
Head, Chris Jackson, Kamila Janska, Andy Owen,
Sebastian Thomas and Aline Tima
Process developed with VÃO and Scot Blyth

A Família em Desordem / The Family in Disorder
Casa do Bandeirante, Museu da Cidade de São
Paulo, São Paulo
2 September 2018 – 17 February 2019
Cinthia Marcelle with the participation of Bruna
Braza, Willieny Cruz, Bruno Augusto Faria, Rafael
Freire, Bruno Augusto Ramos and Aline Tosto