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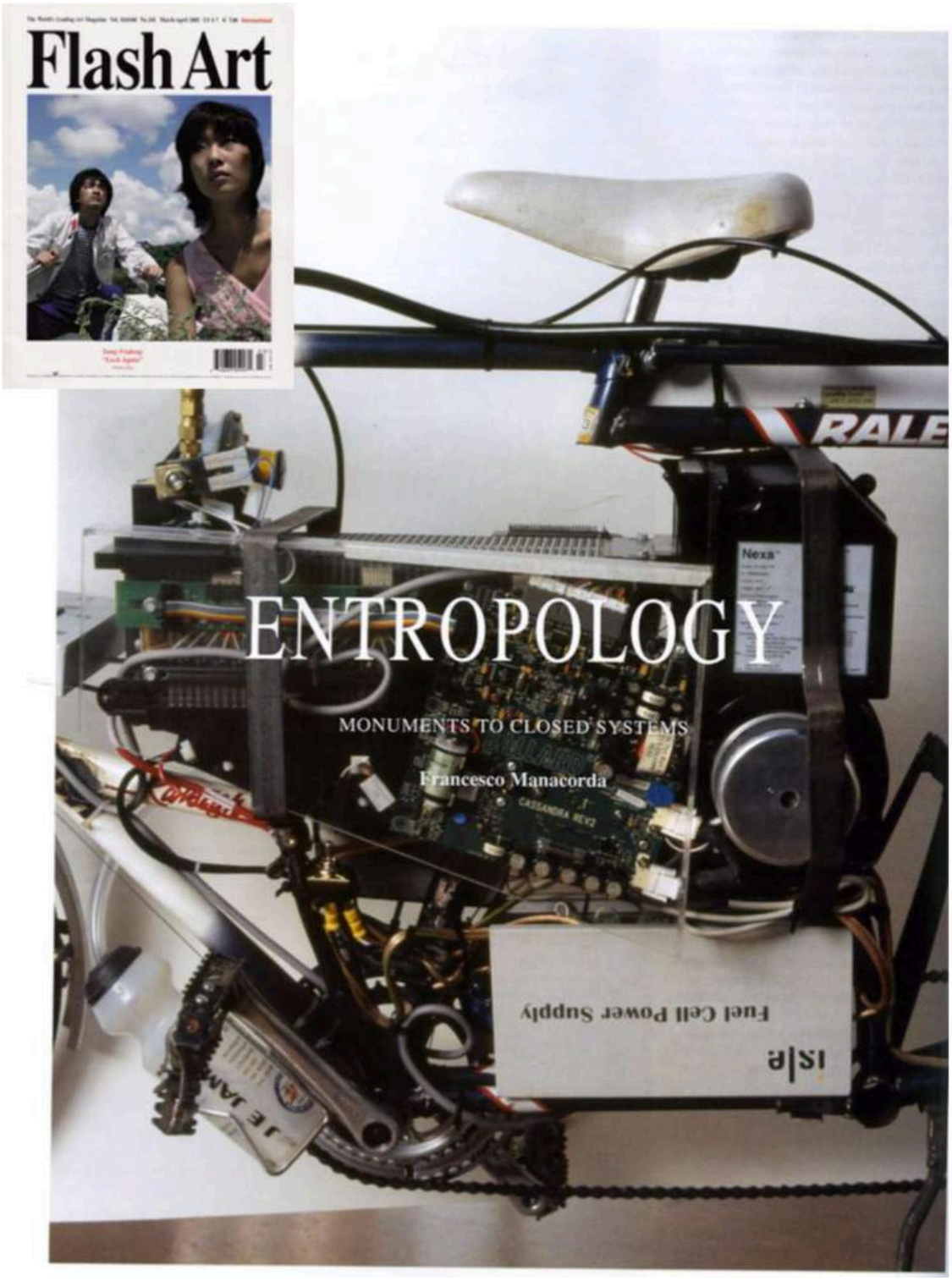
IVAN NAVARRO

FLASH ART, mars - avril 2005



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ENERGY IS THE BASIS of human economic and cultural life, intertwining different layers of signification. As Georges Bataille powerfully observed, "A movement is produced on the surface of the globe that results from the circulation of energy at this point in the universe. The economic activity of men appropriates this movement, making use of the resulting possibilities for certain ends. But this movement has a pattern and laws with which, as a rule, those who use them and depend on them are unacquainted."[1] From a scientific point of view, there are two laws regulating energy circulation in thermodynamics. The first and positive law assures us that energy cannot be created or destroyed; its quantity is invariable. The closed system we inhabit — the Earth — contains energy that can be converted from one state into another, a translation whose secondary impact increases the disorder of the system. This irreversible process, postulated in the second law of thermodynamics, is the simplest definition of entropy. While the quantity of energy cannot be altered in the universe, the quality is not conserved in the conversion process. This does not mean that energy has been destroyed, but rather that a form of unavailable energy has been generated, one that is irrevocably lost to man.

Such a 'dissolution sentence' represents a topic whose universal applicability cuts through humanities and science, conflating biology, information theory, psychoanalysis and economics in a common ground and giving them a shared idiom. Transformation of energy and its dispersal can generate a variety of experimental artistic positions, from attempts to balance our energy budget with nature and slow down entropy, to a metaphor for language and domain translations, jumping between thermodynamic and conceptual entropy — when the energy of an idea is subjected to a sequence of distillations. The most extreme position remains the one that is attracted to entropy, verging on an appeal for decay, which has its main apologist in Robert Smithson: "I'm interested in collaborating with entropy. Some day I would like to compile all the different entropies. All the classifications would lose their grids. Levi-Strauss had a good insight; he suggested we change the study of anthropology into 'entropology.' It would be a study that devotes itself to the process of disintegration in highly developed structures. After all, wreckage is often more interesting than structure."[2]

Entropy is one of the elements permeating Simon Starling's work. He recently produced two projects relating to the Tabernas Desert in Spain, which is rapidly and entropically expanding. The first work is *Kakteenhaus* (2003) — a Cereus cactus, originally found growing in the Tabernas Desert, Andalucia, on the set of the *Texas Hollywood* film studio, dug up and transported 2,145km to Frankfurt am Main in a Volvo 240 Estate. In this complicated formula, the engine of a Volvo — inefficiently burning fuel — is used first to transport a cactus, and is then dislocated inside the exhibition space, converting it into a greenhouse. There, the engine is inappropriately employed to maintain the temperature necessary to sustain the cactus. A model of efficiency in its use of renewable energy, the cactus is kept alive in museum captivity by the engine's function being reduced to that of a stove, pointing out the car's inefficient conversion of heat into movement.

In the second work, Starling plays similar but reversed elements against each other. In the exhibition space, viewers are confronted with the leftovers of a sequence of operations: *Tabernas Desert Run* (2004) is a closed system, both on a physical and metaphorical level. The sculpture is a sealed plexiglas case containing a modified bicycle and a watercolor of a cactus. Starling has fitted onto a normal bike an electrically powered engine and a fuel cell to produce the power to set the bike in motion. This cell produces electricity by combining hydrogen (contained in an adjacent bottle) and oxygen present in the desert — where the only system producing it is the cactus. After having harnessed free electrons, the only waste is pure water — the element that the cactus most needs and efficiently conserves. Such detritus of the energy production was then collected by the artist to paint the watercolor depicting a mirrored system: the cactus.

These two projects are inverted transformations of recurrent elements. While in *Kakteenhaus* the entropy of the chain of transformations is high in order to highlight the low entropy system of the cactus; in *Tabernas Desert Run* the only waste produced by the thermodynamic process ends up as the vehicle to produce a traditional watercolor of the natural system that consumes water and produces oxygen. But Starling's successions of energy exchanges operate also on a different level, one that implies that besides its thermodynamic value, all matter used in the experiment carries an ideal energy, constituted by a specific set of cultural references. Such semantic transformations can indicate how the ideal value of a culturally charged object is relayed or dispersed when transformed. Can a Kunsthalle, turned into a greenhouse through the engine of a Volvo, exchange meaning with a Cereus cactus introduced into the Tabernas Desert by Sergio Leone to shoot his spaghetti western *Mexican Village*? Conversely, does the condensation harnessed from the oxygen in the Tabernas Desert maintain its significance in the depiction of a cactus from the same area contained (with the means of its production) in a box hinting at Hans Haacke's *Condensation Cube*? Energy and cultural significance are entangled in a 'nested loop' of conversions, and the artworks generated from these closed systems equate thermodynamics with the transformative potential of metaphor.

Above: IVÁN NAVARRO, Molotov Cocktail Nostalgia, 2001. Glass bottles, gasoline, metal, aluminum plates and heat, 180 x 90 x 90 cm. Installation view at Art Omi, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Roebling Hall, New York.
Opposite page: SIMON STARLING, Tabernas Desert Run, 2004. Fuel cell powered bicycle, vitrine, watercolor paper, watercolor paint, 170 x 224 x 62 cm. Installation view at The Modern Institute. Courtesy of The Modern Institute, Glasgow.

A similar model of transformation operates in Allora and Calzadilla's projects. *Returning a Sound* (2004) is a video shot in Vieques, an island where NATO carried out bombing experiments for 60 years. The island was returned to its inhabitants in 2002 after a long non-violent protest. The camera follows a moped driven by a former civil disobedient in a tour around the island. A suspiciously green landscape signals the urge for decontamination. The title of the piece alludes to the motorcycle's exhaust pipe, to which the artists have attached a trumpet. The fumes produced by the vehicle are turned into a sound that speaks of political victory but also parodies, through its squeaky, random melody, a call to arms. The conversion, almost a language translation, jumps from a literal to an ideological level, articulating a claim for ownership and sustainable land use. By means of its exhaust — a form of entropic waste — the vehicle produces a sound that signifies victory after the revolt. This re-use of entropic waste contrasts starkly with the high entropy generated by the bombing experiments, both on a physical and metaphorical level.

Puerto Rican Light (1998–2003) includes an existing "instant-monument" (to borrow Smithson's words): *Puerto*

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Above: IVÁN NAVARRO, You Sit, You Die, 2002. Fluorescent light bulbs, shoelaces, electric cables, heat, and a printed list of people executed in the electric chair in Florida, USA, 90 x 120 x 60 cm. Installation view at Joseph Helman, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Roebling Hall, New York. Below, background: DAN FLAVIN, Puerto Rican Light (to Jeanie Blake), 1965; foreground: ALLORA & CALZADILLA, Puerto Rican Light, 2003. Battery bank containing solar panels, batteries and inverter. Installation view at Tate Modern, London. Courtesy Lisson, London.
Opposite page: DANIEL ROTH, Cabrini Green Forest (Portal), 2004. 5 part installation, pencil on paper, b/w print, C - print, fiberglass and colored water. Courtesy of Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe.

Rican Light (to Jeanie Blake), realized by Dan Flavin in 1965. Allora and Calzadilla short-circuit literal and metaphorical levels, following Flavin's title as an instruction. In this *mise en abîme*, they provide the minimalist sculpture with electrical power harnessed from the sunlight captured through photovoltaic cells in Puerto Rico, and conserved in batteries. The equipment that allows this process is exhibited in a large crate. The thermodynamic transfer of energy becomes the vehicle for a political comment on the relationship between the U.S.A. and Puerto Rico through a closed system implanted in art history. The sunlight from Puerto Rico is turned into colored neon light and dispersed in the gallery space. If one aspect of Flavin's work is using light to foreground the exhibition space and the visitor as a perceiving subject, Allora and Calzadilla's addition highlights, through a pun, the exchange of energy from nature to artifice. Their web of references conflates thermodynamics and politics by playing with the ambiguity of the English word 'power,' which means both electricity made available for use, and hegemony, as in the control exerted by a political constituency.

Conceptual and political energy conversions are at stake as well in the practice of Chilean artist Iván Navarro. *Molotov Cocktail Nostalgia* (2001) is a sculpture that consists of 20 Molotov cocktails made from glass bottles of different beers, wines and spirits. Displayed as a spiral, they are surmounted by a helicoidal series of circular aluminum plates, modified to become turning helixes. The heat generated by the cocktails, ready to explode if thrown, is converted into inoffensive movement. The work generates enormous heat that visitors perceive as dangerous and menacing. The destructive potential of the bombs gets slowly and relentlessly wasted, without producing the expected political or social turmoil. Navarro's gesture implies that political energy able to effect change is absent here. The highly inefficient energy conversion of the work's system becomes a sign for ideological entropy; the increase of disorder that thermodynamics can measure becomes a metaphor for the irreversible loss of political fervor.

The elements comprising Navarro's works often constitute a closed set of politically charged objects holding together the artwork as a discrete structure. *You Sit, You Die* (2002) consists of a deckchair whose framework is built with neon tubes held together by shoelaces. The seat of the chair comprises a printout covered with a list of the names of people sentenced to death by electric chair in Florida. Each element carries connotations that can be conceived as their embedded meaning, their ideal energy. Shoelaces are notoriously the first objects confiscated from prisoners to

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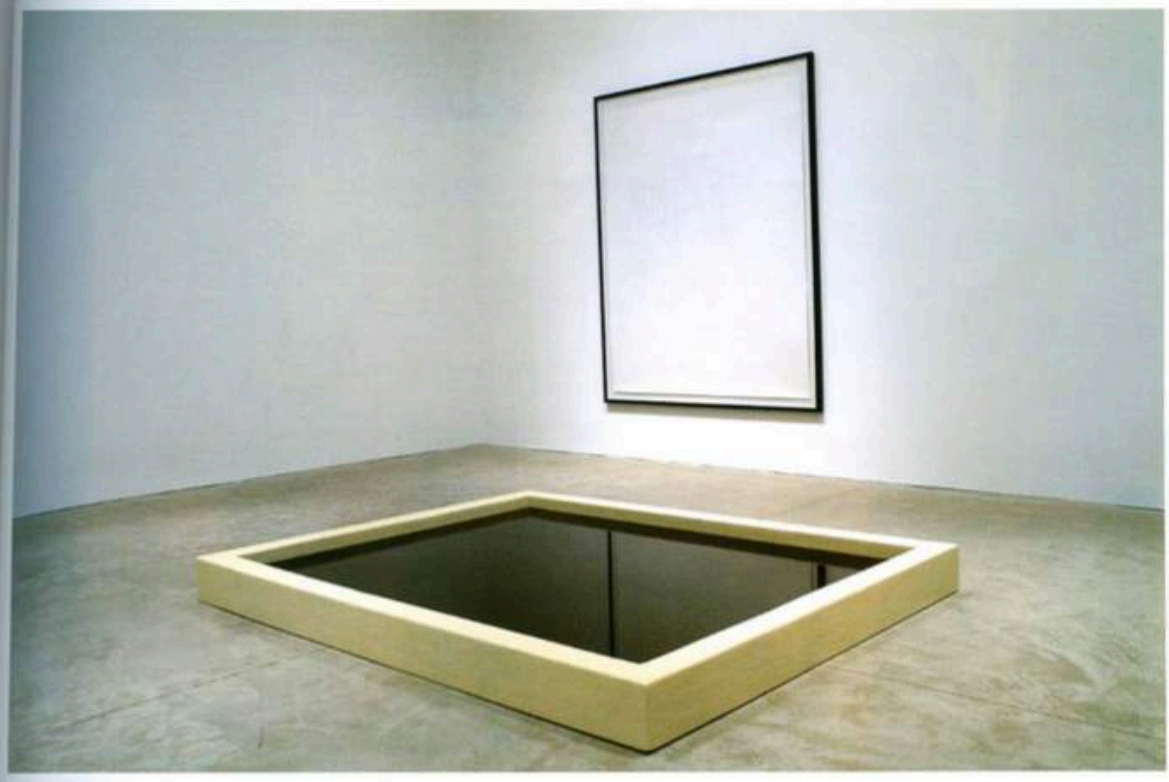

prevent them from hanging themselves, and the neon tubes transform the means used to kill in Florida — electricity — into artificial light. The work creates a contrast between its delicate appearance and a genuine potential to harm: whoever sits on *You Sit, You Die* would, in fact, fulfill the prophecy of the title. In a macabre parallelism, physicists use the term 'heat death' when energy becomes unavailable following its dispersal; once again, the measure of such a stage is entropy.

Mysterious passages between distant and concealed worlds form the secret web connecting locations, ideas and stories in Daniel Roth's work. These links are always associated to an organic element that seems destined to take over the ordered world. In *Cabrini Green Forest* (2004), Roth exposes to the public what looks like the forensic evidence of complex research. On one side of the installation there is a plan of the basement of the downtown Chicago Metropolitan Correction Center, an exquisite triangular skyscraper designed by Harry Weese and connected to the Federal Court through an underground passage; images of a prisoner wagon and of the HMP Weare, a British prison ship; some drawings depicting tunnels invaded by lush vegetation; and a small, square pool filled with brown water. These objects illustrate the theory that under Chicago's jail there is a network of passages leading to an underground forest connected to the infamous Cabrini Green public housing project. This hidden otherworld appears to be linked to several floating prisons — including the Weare — and can be accessed through the pool, which, in fact, is a portal.

The Cabrini Green project is one of the poorest and most dangerous areas of Chicago. Characterized as a high-rise slum, this failed development houses a community statistically consistent with the inhabitants of the more centrally located Correction Center. The contrast between the two architectural developments is striking: the slick, innovative prison conceals a surveillance system controlling the dark side of social disorder, while the estate is a ruined ghetto where crime seems correlated to the portentously failed architectural planning. A map of the forest shows that it is located underneath the prison and is incrementally expanding towards the estate and the prison ships. The principle of slow and continuous dissolution seems to be connected to crime and the institutions controlling it; nature's destructive and ambivalently vital energy — what Bataille called 'pure expenditure' — ravages architectural order. Every component of Roth's hidden system is connected to an object located in the installation. Hanging from one wall is a big green case. It is a sort of telephone, a mysterious instrument of communication between distant places. To its right there is a pneumatic mail communication device, while to the left is an organic lump, the only visible (and apparently audible) sign of the forest's uncontainable exuberance.

Roth's array of material alludes to an unwavering growth from an ordered condition to one of suffocating disorder. Such an approach can be claimed to embrace entropy as the unchangeable symptom of the closed system called Earth. In a similar intellectual posture, Robert Smithson once described, while visiting a quarry in Pennsylvania, his intuition about finality and obsolescence: "All boundaries and distinctions lost their meaning in this ocean of slate and collapsed all notion of gestalt unity. The present fell forward and backward into a tumult of 'de-differentiation,' to use Anton Ehrenzweig's word for entropy." [3] The 'accursed share,' the thermodynamic principle of irreversible loss, seems to represent a pretext for artists ultimately to mirror the way different individuals negotiate their relationship to slow yet inexorable dissolution. ■

Francesco Manacorda is a critic and independent curator based in London.

Notes:

1. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share* (1967). New York: Zone Books, 1988, pp. 20-21.
2. Robert Smithson, "The Earth, Subject to Cataclysms, Is a Cruel Master" (1971), in Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p. 11.
3. Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects" (1968), Ibid, p. 110.