

CRISTIN TIERNEY



Sign of Abandonment

Jorge Tacla at Cristin Tierney in Chelsea, Manhattan

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Jorge Tacla. Sign of Abandonment, installation view. Photo by John Muggenborg

One might be tempted to interpret Jorge Tacla's latest series of works at Cristin Tierney - Sign of Abandonment - as referencing the decreasing use of the book in favor of a digital world of information. Yet, Tacla's previous work suggests, to me at least, that he is not predisposed to make such a linear, literal observation. Furthermore, the internet has clearly not decreased, challenged nor changed the cultural hegemony embodied in urban and university libraries; if anything, it has reinforced it and we now have a term like 'digital colonialism' describing how the internet is replacing native languages with English and promoting the American values of consumerism and political demagoguery world-wide. Given Tacla's track record, and the fact that he often uses structures to represent systems of culture and power, I doubt these pieces could be depicting the shift away from one form of hegemony to a more potent one. Indeed, having read numerous

CRISTIN TIERNEY

reviews of his work, I am convinced that even critics who have tried to tackle Tacla on deeper levels have held on to too much literalism while discussing their themes of history, violence, decay and memory.

After an earthquake in his native Chile, in 1985, Tacla was able to see the faults underlying the construction of buildings which Chileans heretofore had felt were permanent. Ruins have become a pervading type of image in his work and even when he presents a structure intact, he often presents it from its most assailable position. Allende's La Moneda, the Oklahoma Federal Building, the Pentagon, and the WTC became so assailable because they became symbols whether they were meant to be or not. What I get from Tacla is that, due to such severe and competing ideological divisions in the world, virtually any type of building anywhere is going to carry an ideological message, and therefore, it bears a target for someone or some group. It is as if the construction of anything, anywhere, will be taken as a provocative taunt by someone else.

So Tacla looks at his structures and ruins within the context of the creation of culture and power systems and he could be saying that inherent in the creation of any such structure is an intentional or unintentional antagonism or affront almost challenging an attack from someone. Tacla explains that he presents his structures in negative images to differentiate between real and pictorial space, but, to me, these images are in negative form because they are just one half of the total potential situation - the ultimate reality, the ultimate consummation of the architectural process, the positive form of the image or active aspect is, paradoxically, the almost inevitable attack or the actual attack that occurred to create the ruins.

The ruins of the World Trade Center represented a collision between ideological matter and ideological anti-matter – the depictions of the buildings and ruins are anti-matter because they, like negative space, exist in the psyche of those intent on wreaking destruction because they feel a personal or ideological outrage from these structures. Please recall the open hostility and malice in New York City directed against those who wished to create a Mosque and Islamic cultural center relatively near 'Ground Zero'. The

CRISTIN TIERNEY

attempt to create these buildings became such an unintended affront to so many (white/Christian) New Yorkers that the power-brokers of the city and state had to negotiate some type of deal to stop its construction – even though the construction was guaranteed by the US Constitution.

The creation of any state or religious supported structure brings with it its own instability and potential destruction due to the severe ideological divisions in the world and a lack of desire of those with differing viewpoints to coexist. So the common denominator of Tacla's work, to me, is his awareness of the intolerance that exists between cultures and ideologies and the open question as to the source of this venomous bitterness. But, what about the buildings destroyed through natural disaster in Tacla's previous work? Playing devil's advocate again, I could argue that the construction of cities is a type of in-your-face gesture to nature, itself, and an affront to the way in which humans used to live in greater balance with nature for generations. Frankly, why should there not have been a Lisbon earthquake in the 1700s or a horrific tsunami that killed thousands in a highly developed nation just a few years ago? The creation of urban cities and nation states becomes a provocative gesture, in itself.

The library would seem to be anti-entropic, anti-decay, and nothing but goodness...but it is also a type of ruin. It seems to have done a better job than the cathedral (another image Tacla has used in the past) of disguising its intentions, but what is the flaw or fault that makes the library vulnerable to abandonment or greater ruin? Well, even the 'library' can carry an ideological message. Since Marx people have been looking at who creates knowledge and why. The library, perhaps, represents a form of social memory constructed by an elite, urban class, a form of memory and form of engagement with the world to be contrasted with that of previous generations of people who inhabited the earth in a less harmful manner to the earth.

One of the libraries featured in this series is the Trinity College Library in Dublin. At one point, Ireland was an area of indigenous folks who were conquered and forced 'within the pale' by the English. It was a brutal and merciless struggle of conquest which, actually,

CRISTIN TIERNEY

set the prototype for how the English and Americans would subdue the native population in North America. A library established in Ireland represents, perhaps, a system of cultural power and cultural control which the Irish (or any indigenous population) once thrived without, in a different relationship to each other and to the Earth. Much found in libraries has been written with an agenda and various prejudices, and absorbed to predictable results.

As Marx pointed out, the ideology of the upper class seems to trickle down to everyone else (Gramsci's concept of hegemony is based on this). The symbolism is not perfect since there has been much 'anti-hegemonic' material published, but, then again, the anti-hegemonic material could be considered just the other side of the coin, or a negative image of a positive thing, in that it owes its very existence to hegemony and becomes a corollary to it. So even anti-hegemonic knowledge plays into the hegemonic game and is absorbed by it.

When Tacla depicted the Pentagon, it was in the 1990s – its symbolism to certain folks around the world and a vulnerability created through a lack of precaution and too much self-assurance allowed it to be attacked on 9/11. Tacla presents the library and the museum at its vulnerable point now, so just as buildings can be obliterated, so can libraries. Early Christians destroyed the library at Alexandria because the amazing insights of Euripides, Sophocles and Aeschylus were 'pagan' and we have been forced to live and develop without their immensely powerful possible influence. Yet, at one time folks lived quite well without libraries, and this remains a possibility underscoring all contemporary and future history. Maybe Tacla's work hearkens back to a type of life where the relationship to each other and the earth was so different that huge constructions of cultural power and dominance were not necessary. Modern human history is predicated on the obliteration and replacement of non-urban cultures, and, coincidentally, this has created a huge vulnerability for urban, developed societies as ideologies conflict in internecine destruction and nature rears its head through natural disasters and the effects of forced climate change.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

On a more personal and less literal level, the abandonment of libraries might also mean reaching the point where one can strive toward what Paul Tillich seemed to call The Eternal Now. The library can represent a cognitive process of referring to memory and imputing knowledge to the self instead of allowing self-understanding and humane growth to develop in a less coerced, guided or procrustean manner. Instead of the eternal now, memory and knowledge can intrude on our introspection and make unwarranted demands on our inner awareness or maturation.

That being said, I would love to experience more and more of the eternal now, but I am still a huge reader who is concerned about the possible loss of the book and literacy in the future. The SAT test, apparently, has been ‘dumbed-down’ because American students do not read as much quality work as they used to and they struggle now with complex or obscure vocabulary. Museums and libraries are at their most assailable and vulnerable points these days not only due to ideology but also due to the drop in standards and expectations brought about by the internet. I can still recall the days when I carried 15 or more books home from the university library to do a 20-page research paper. Those days seem to be long gone and, hegemony or no hegemony, I think we are the worse for this loss. The show is up until December 16.