

Material Strength: powerless concrete & the ruin of its certainties

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During the 50's, scholars from different Western academic backgrounds began to speak about the term Modernization: meaning capitalization, urbanization, industrialization and commercialization. Four decades later, the term shifted and by the 1990s we had begun to speak about Modernity. The *-ization* referred to a positive movement about development and progress, and the *-ity* to a massive intellectual production focused on the failures of the former. But instead of finding a better definition of Modernity, to label it as positive or negative, we need to look to understand how it has been used in the discourse of power¹.

The failure of Modernity is at the heart of Lucas Simões' practice. His artworks are always at the crossroads of a dialogue between raw architectural material and its inhabitants; in a silenced freehand that disestablishes our certainty about its rigor and strength, his work reveals the agency of what we thought the most vulnerable part of the structure. *Perpetual Instability* is an installation presented at Space In Between, where the weight and movement of our bodies, under the force of gravity, crack a concrete floor. Cement bursts due to our presence, but it is also able to maintain its unity thanks to the soft base of foam that holds it. Material strength.

For this site-specific work, Simões is making a comment on the Balfour Tower, which was constructed in 1967 and is currently undergoing a process of human eviction and structural – and societal – reformation. The tower was commissioned as part of an urban renewal programme of social housing for residents in the then depressed and damaged area of East London. Simões' installation highlights how the notion of 'social housing' has become a lasting patrimonial legacy and significantly contributed to a gentrification process, in which art also plays an ambivalent role.

In recent years, the UK has witnessed a battle for the preservation of Brutalist buildings that are at risk of demolition: Robin Hood Gardens housing estate, in the same area as the Balfour Tower, is an example. It was designed by Peter and Alison Smithson, two of the main theorists of Brutalism, and other examples include the Milton Court portion of the Barbican and Hereford Square in Kensington². These projects in particular demonstrate how Brutalism oscillates from well-intentioned patrimony on the one hand to ugly dystopian burdens – in need of demolition – on the other.

The British Brutalism movement started during the economic depression that followed World War II. Its pioneering architects inspired all kinds of critics that considered their creations no more than hubris monstrosities, gargantuan of people, inhuman places to live and generators of inhumanity. Added to this backlash, was the high cost of maintaining the buildings that – due to both government failings and social deprivation – were not met and so they began to fall into disrepair. Le Corbusier's dream was to influence the behaviour of people through architecture in an attempt to "transform the moral and sentimental lives of human beings"³, shaping a new kind of citizen in the process. The studies of Robert Gifford concluded that, "children who live in the *High Rises* have, on average, more behavioural problems. (...) crime and fear of crime probably are greater in high-rise buildings"⁴. Lunatic Erno Goldfinger⁵, architect of the Balfour Tower, blamed the poor people of ignorance and incompetency for messing up his

¹ Cooper, Frederic, *Colonialism in Question*, California University Press, 2005

² www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/architecture/battle-to-save-britains-brutalist-buildings-from-the-bulldozer-1890905.html

³ Beauman, Ned, Introduction to Ballard, JG, *High Rise*, London, Famingo, 1998

⁴ Gifford, R., *The Consequences of Living in High Rise Buildings*, *Architectural Science Review* 50, 2007

⁵ In *Concretopia* (see 6) Goldfinger is described as a lunatic, his behaviour was so bad towards the workers. In Ballard's book *High Rise* (see 3) he is represented by a character called Mr Royal (the egomaniac architect of the High Rise) who - as Goldfinger did - lived in the top floor of the building

creations⁶: Modernity had proved itself an unattainable project for those on the periphery, for those that don't deserve it⁷.

These reactions did not go unnoticed. In response, J. G. Ballard wrote the novel *High Rise* in 1975, in which middle-class and well-intentioned citizens became violent characters, as a result of their environment. People were distributed throughout the building depending on social class and status, highlighting and exacerbating the inherent classist problem of social housing. *High Rise* is inspired by the Balfour Tower and narrates the process of deprivation within a community living in a modern high rise as the building's high-tech systems start to experience failures. The inhabitants are thrown into a status of psychological distress and engage in a savage fight for survival, having lost all interest in the external world. Surely Samuel Becket was also speaking about Brutalist social housing in his short story *The Lost Ones* of 1970? His characters lived within a cylinder of rubber with walls fifty meters in circumference and eighteen meters high, their asexual bodies roamed around the building, all lost and suffering various levels of anxiety and alienation.

Concrete has been revealed as a fragile material, vulnerable in the face of time and erosion. The specialist in charge of the problematic maintenance of Brutalist buildings in Brazil often takes the opportunity of 'restoration' to soften the original architecture with colours, glasses or sympathetic materials.

Brazilian Brutalism – consolidated as fashionable by the 1960s – began as a moment of economic emergency, leading to the construction of the Modernist masterpiece that is Brasilia. Contrary to Brutalism in the UK, in Brazil it was described as elegant and lyrical. The monumentality of the Brazilian tropics was reflected in these massive spaces of the new institutional buildings; the imposing tropical rainforest merging with the raw materials of the buildings.

This interchangeability between interior and exterior space is reflected in the interrelation of materials used in Simões' *Vazios (Empty Works)*; pseudo-monuments of concrete that frame vulnerable films of paper. The position of the latter is shaped by the solid structure of cement, in a tenacious determination to inhabit the space by finding its own form. As such, the sheets sexualise the concrete, weakening its hardness and questioning its certainties. The paper shapes fill the emptiness of the structures, discussing with it the texture of the material that will eventually crack and break up. Judith Butler took the concept of agency to explain the moment at which power rotates upon itself, producing other powers of contestation and resistance. The very nature of power lies in its capacity to be reconfigured and re-signified. That is why agency is the exceptional and lasting element that power has remained unable to control⁸. In this sense *agency* is a moment of disobedience. *Perpetual Instability* shows the agency and strength of the human body against the fragility of architecture; the power of life against the structures that discipline our existence on behalf of productivity. As viewers, we roam Simões' installations, directly affecting the vulnerability of its architecture. The pleasure of destroying those frames, pleasure from cracking the concrete, demonstrating what a disobedient body can do...

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⁶ Grindrod, John, *Concretopia: A Journey Around the Rebuilding of Post-war Britain*, Old Street Publishing, 2013. With my gratefulness to Webb Yates, Steve, *Unexpected Collaborations in Virtual Engineering*, Back Dog Publishing, 2015

⁷ Cooper, Frederic, *Colonialism in Question*, California University Press, 2005

⁸ Butler, Judith, *The Psychic Life of Power, Theories in Subjection*, Stanford University Press, 1997