

PRESSBOOK

Iván ARGOTE

Artforum

September 2017



Iván Argote

PERROTIN

You can tell a lot about a society by how it imagines its opposite. The term *antipode* derives from the Greek for having one foot facing the wrong direction. Its geographical usage—designating points diametrically opposite one another on the globe—stems from the ancient belief that the other side of the earth held a kind of netherworld, where everything was inverted, causing the men who lived there to walk backwards.

Iván Argote tests this theory, surveying a pair of modern-day antipodes for his twenty-two-minute video *As Far As We Could Get*, 2017. Urban antipodes are rare, with only a handful of possible case studies. Argote selected the Indonesian municipality of Palembang and the Colombian town of Neiva. While physically the farthest points from one another on the globe, the two cities share a status as former colonies and occupy positions similarly peripheral to the flows of global capital and culture. The film tracks other commonalities through seven chapters, applying Borgesian taxonomies to catalogue anachronistic monuments or attitudes toward public displays of affection.

The first chapter, “Axis,” takes place on basketball courts on opposite sides of the world. (Sports are, as ever, a ready escort for global capitalism.) Each bounce of a ball traces out the single, invisible axis connecting Palembang to Neiva. In another chapter, the artist scours each of the cities for someone born on November 9, 1989, the day the Berlin Wall fell. As Argote interviews each representative, it becomes clear how little bearing this seemingly earth-shattering event has had on day-to-day life in Palembang or Neiva. “The Other,” a chapter set during respective New Year’s celebrations, follows the artist onto the streets of each locale, where he taps strangers on the shoulder to wish them a joyous holiday, filming their response to his touch. Via voice-over, a narrator explains that a true “decolonization of the spirit” requires tenderness, not aggression—“the revenge of love” that gives this exhibition its title, *La Venganza del Amor* (a phrase pointedly denied translation into English.)

Argote’s own generosity reveals itself in a particularly striking sequence within the video’s sixth chapter. In Neiva, a folk singer answered the artist’s newspaper ad not because he was born on November 9, but because he wanted to share a love song with “the other side of the Universe.” As the man’s voice unfurls, the screen splits into two horizontal frames. The top shows a close-up of the ground as a woman’s face slowly drops to plant a kiss on a smooth stone. The bottom image is projected upside down, so that a finger slowly sinking into a mound of sandy soil appears as if it’s spiraling upward, the knuckles meeting the unseen other’s lips as they brush the stone. It’s an exchange of intimacy, with nothing but the whole world in between. “So is this about otherness?” the narrator queries.

As Far As We Could Get screened in intervals across the back of the gallery, whose remaining walls were lined with recent works from the artist’s ongoing series “Setting Up a System,” 2014–, speculative archives of laser-cut documents mounted on metal frames. With the close of each chapter of the film, the lights would switch on, directing attention to the sofa-size *Sweet Potato*, 2017, colonizing the center of the room. While apples have enjoyed a long association with knowledge (from the Garden of Eden to the backs of laptops everywhere), Argote proposes the potato—the “apple of the earth”—as a more apt icon of the globalized world. Paying tribute to this humble tuber, Argote fashioned an aluminum cast, coated in gold leaf, to reference the precious metal extracted by the same explorers who would spread the potato to the far corners of the earth. The potato, for all its difference, is no less deserving than the apple. There is no wrong way to turn one’s foot.

—Kate Sutton

Willie Doherty

ALEXANDER AND BONIN

Once home to twenty thousand people, the town of Braddock, Pennsylvania, now houses around two thousand, having lost 90 percent of its population through the withering of the steel industry. That means empty houses and streets—the visual substance of Willie Doherty’s *No Return*, which he made for a show of work by Northern Irish artists at the Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, very near Braddock, in the spring and summer of 2017. Alongside its succession of images, this fifteen-minute video has an aural component: Doherty combines his pictures of the town with a voice-over narrative, an image-and-text combination familiar from a number of his earlier works. In its tale of pollution and threat, *No Return* particularly reminds me of *Secretion*, 2012, which imagined the gradual spread of a mysterious epidemic. This time around, instead of devising a complex shoot using a crew, Doherty worked alone, producing a steady flow of almost motionless images. His videos are never exactly kinetic, but *No Return* emphasizes his work’s quality of watchful quiet.

Stories like Braddock’s are familiar in the United States—the entire city of Detroit offers proof—but Braddock has a particular visibility, both within and beyond the art world. For one thing it is the hometown of the artist LaToya Ruby Frazier, whose photographs of the place, powerful to the point of devastating, have been published widely and were included in a Whitney Biennial a few years back. For another, Braddock’s mayor since 2006, John Fetterman, has devised tactics for the town’s revival that have won national attention, if also all-too-limited success. So Braddock is a place where the survival issues of life in the Rust Belt have come to a boil. You would know this from