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Didier Faustino, Opus Incertum, 2008.

Photo: courtesy Bureau des
Mésarchitectures, Paris



Of Sabotage in architecture: Didier Faustino's anti-projects

By Vanessa Morisset

Far from the ignominy of nihilists' sabotages — Souvarine's attack in the mine at the end of Zola's *Germinal*, or the fire in the aeronautics factory set by the mysterious Frank Fry at the beginning of Hitchcock's *Saboteur* — the figure of the artist as saboteur is eminently seductive. (1) Like Dionysius who laughs as he is being dismembered, s/he is at the origin of exalting and salutary destructions. For instance the busted up instruments on the rock stages of the 1960s, or Jimi Hendrix's burning guitar, (2) are destructions which are like invitations to a trance, with artists going beyond the limits imposed by materials on their practice. In the artistic domain sabotage is often a scuttling. Artists often revolt against their work conditions, against material, but also against institutions, and even their patrons, by taking positions that combine provocation and demands for creative freedom. At the beginning of the twentieth century the Futurists —specialists in this category — initiated the "slap in the face of public taste (Mayakovski)," in the figurative and literal sense, with their glaring colours glorifying industrial production and evenings organized to degenerate into

fistfights. Nowadays, in an echo to their merry ransackings, particularly as a countering of artistic institutions and museums — a call to visit the Louvre only on the Day of the Dead, the idea of filling the Venice Grand Canal with cement to turn it into a highway — the young Columbian artist Ivan Argote tags two Mondrian paintings at the Musée national d'art moderne (Paris) as he films himself in a twelve-second flash video entitled *Retouch* (2008). (3)

Even in architecture, a field that's usually structured by the strict legal and administrative constraints of the construction industry, saboteurs, such as Didier Faustino and the Bureau des Mésarchitectures, operate successfully. (4) Their work, which ranges from performance and video to construction in public space, is based precisely on derailing the conventional procedures of architecture with the goal of denouncing its latent authoritarianism. Through his projects, works and productions, Faustino sabotages his own practice, that of his milieu, and public order.

To grasp to what extent the sabotage of his own practice characterizes Faustino's activities, a first indicator is his founding of an agency called LAPS (Laboratoire d'Architecture, Performance et Sabotage) shortly after obtaining his architecture diploma. Through this agency he offered the possibility of sabotaging his work at any time; a possibility that has remained constantly open and which is made evident in works he produces, in his capacity as an architect, that don't belong to architecture. Through his quite varied productions, touching on several disciplinary fields, books, performances, videos, conceptual projects, he responds with outrageously inadequate measures to what is requested of him. For example, in 2006, when a couple commissioned a pavilion for their amorous encounters, he proposed a porcelain house, or more precisely a Porcelain Bunker, which protects one from outside gazes but only for a short time, since the construction is inevitably doomed to crumble (like love?). The inevitable refusal of the project makes it a conceptual work that questions the perpetuity of the built as a commonplace of architecture. The following is a more recent unexpected response: for an exhibition at Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York City, he presented only a video, (G) Host in the (S) Hell, which shows him progressively covering his face with chewing gum, an action which a priori seems to have nothing to do with architecture, but through which Faustino questions its role as a second skin. The exhibition was so much the more surprising because to enter it one had to pass through a labyrinth of wire meshes and obstructions installed at the building's entrance. As a soldier's obstacle course or as a completely separate piece from the rest of the exhibition, this movement impeding installation is a perfect illustration of Faustino's approach — to sabotage oneself in order to question the meaning of one's activity. As a last example of his current list of wrong-footed proposals is his participation in the Venice Biennial of Architecture in the fall of 2008, with a piece evocatively called *Opus Incertum*, a work that's closer to sculpture than to architecture. On this painted wooden structure, one can lie belly down to experience the "leap into the void" position, something which refers more to Yves Klein's 1960 performance and its reinterpretations (for example the one by Fayçal

Baghriche, 2004) (5) than to buildings by Mies van der Rohe or Le Corbusier. It's only in a roundabout way that this work makes one reflect on some of the implications of verticality in architecture. Such is the function of artistic scuttling for Faustino; he sabotages his own practice there where it's most conventional in order to better come back to what's essential for him. In doing so, he also sabotages the architecture milieu, its hypocrisy and dubious compromises.

With Faustino sabotage often takes place through a redefinition of the competition and commission conditions to which he responds, and he thus points a finger at the illegitimate authoritarianism stemming from one of the most common procedures in the milieu. Faustino protests against the "the usual sponsors/patrons that act like filters telling you: 'we know what the people who will use the building want,' this is what we are putting into question, this is what I have tried to question from the beginning of my architectural activity, these people to who I refuse to grant the authority to pre-write and define what building we will produce." (6) The project which best expresses the opposition to the milieu's operating rules — and this with a positive outcome, i.e. the building of an architectural object — is Stairway to Heaven, "a public space for individual use," created between 2001 and 2005 in Castelo Branco, Portugal. In response to a call by a local community who wished to build a public space between a historic centre and a social housing block, Faustino proposed a fifteen-meter cement staircase leading to a mini basketball court for one person, a place where one can play while towering over the surroundings. "For one year and a half... the public urban planners and architects put me in a corner and told me that this is a horror, that it's unnamable and can't be put in this space." (7) It was after having submitted the project to the residents, who approved it enthusiastically, that the project went ahead despite the public authorities.

For private commissions, Faustino proceeds in the same way by reformulating his clients' requests and thwarting the appearances that architecture is supposed to serve. To the power represented by a house designed by a young and reputed architect, he substitutes a real need to be filled in his client's life. It is thus that a house project begun in 2001 for Fabrice Hyber, which questioned the artist's aura, was never finished, or that a commission for a luxury resort complex on an island in southern Japan, reformulated as a "micro-phalanstery for tourists," (8) to transform holidays into a meditation on individualism (Ultimate Safety Resort, 2006, Ishigari Island, Japan) was refused. Because they take up lodgings in spaces architecture is supposed to shield us from, Faustino's projects disturb and sow a confusion that spreads from museums to private properties, from public spaces to the most sensitive spaces of the contemporary world.

The circle of incidence of Faustino's work is actually widening to include taboo questions that politics tries hard to put out of sight and muffle. To point out this insidious violence, which consists of denying contemporary societies' thorniest problems, some of his creations transgress the limits of legality, sometime to the point of sabotaging public order,

particularly in places of transit or movement where social inequalities are especially flagrant. In 2000, Faustino built what is undoubtedly the most provocative of his works, *Corps en transit*, an anti-project that questions unequal mobility on a planetary scale, i.e. that of wealthy nations for which mobility is unhindered, and that of poor nations subjected to the control of migratory flows. *Corps en transit*, which consists of a crate made to fit a hunched up human body, was designed as a suitcase to carry clandestine travellers in airplane baggage holds. In denouncing the political laws regulating immigration, laws which in fact contradict the economic laws at the root of migrations, *Corps en transit* exposes the righteous hypocrisy of those who are shocked by the sight of such an object, when the reality of clandestine migrants — one need only think of those who try to travel hidden in airplane landing gears, and who are found fallen to the ground near airports, their bodies suffocated or frozen to death — is far worse.

In parallel to symbolic works such as *Corps en transit*, Faustino also develops objects designed to concretely disturb public order. They are benches, shelters, and lampposts to be installed in streets and to foster all manner of clandestine meetings and gang gatherings. Among these structures *Fight Club* (2004), a boxing ring surrounded by bleachers and closed off by fences, constitutes a “real space of deregulation,” “like a closed zone of non-law where the rules are determined by its users.” (9) As an echo to this project, in a publication presenting his work as a series of booklets, (10) Faustino (in the first booklet) cites a book on the Red Army Fraction, *RAF Guérilla urbaine en Europe occidentale*, 2006, in which the authors Anne Steiner and Loic Debray themselves cite this observation by Andreas Baader: “Illegality as the ‘only liberated territory inside metropolises’.” This sentence, which connects Faustino with terrorist problematics, provides a glimpse into what he’s aiming at with *Fight Club*: the structure not only sabotages public order by equating freedom with illegality, it also invites its users to use it to this end by appropriating the place to fight. Just as with *Corps en transit*, Faustino gives us tools to expose violence in broad daylight. Such seems to be the strategy chosen by the architect to raise questions about things we generally would rather not address, notably the treatment of violence in our societies of control. For, in the last instance, Faustino’s works, which espouse sabotage deliberately, place themselves on the side of a head-on violence to better denounce a more pernicious and devastating violence of which architecture, when it yields to the established order, is the instrument.

[Translated from the French by Bernard Schütze]

NOTES

1. This text develops an idea sketched out in “Opus subversum. Didier Faustino et le Bureau des Mésarchitectures,” 20/27, no. 3, M19 (2009).
2. Julien Blanpied, “Le Bruit qui pense,” *Date limite de conservation* (Vitry-sur-Seine: MAC/VAL, 2009), 95-101.
3. To view the video see his site: www.ivanargote.com.

4. An agency founded in Paris in 2002.
5. Laurent Goumarre, "All Those Falls: Dance and Performances," art press 2: Contemporary Performances, no. 7 (November 2007): 81-90.
6. Didier Faustino, interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Didier Faustino/Bureau des Mésarchitectures (Porto: Serralves Museum, 2003), 14.
7. Ibid., 3
8. Didier Faustino/Bureau des Mésarchitectures, DD Series #21 (Seoul: Damdi Architecture Publishing Co., 2007), 167.
9. Ibid., 101.
10. Plans & Directions Didier F. Faustino (CCA Kitakyushu, Japan, 2006).