

# ART PAPERS

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DESIRE  
AND ITS INTIMATE  
POLITICS: ZOE BELOFF

BLINDNESS  
AND FUTURE PEDAGOGY:  
NICOLAS LOBO

EVIL  
REPRESENTED:  
THE NAZI FETISH

GEOCRITIQUE  
AFTER ACTIVISM:  
BRIAN HOLMES





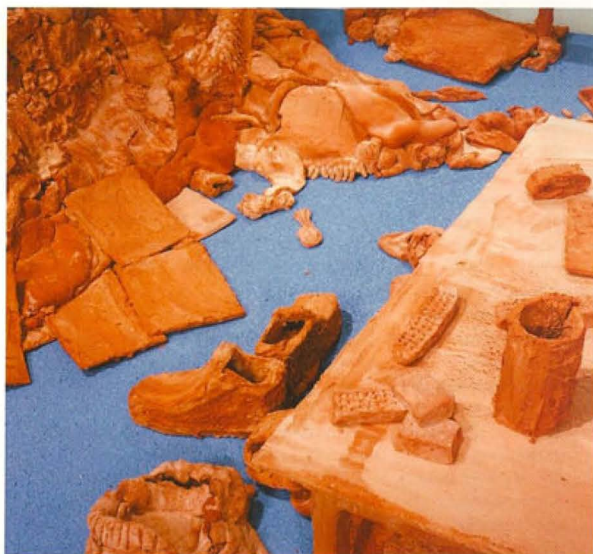
## Invisible Materialities And Future Pedagogies: on Nicolas Lobo

TEXT / GEAN MORENO

These days, we live with a lingering sense that certain things are perpetually kept from us, with an uncomfortable feeling that something important remains inaccessible. This may explain some of our contemporary returns to the esoteric. Theorist Fredric Jameson places this uncomfortable feeling squarely in the realm of the political. In *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, he equates the rise of the conspiracy film—and its logic of concealment—with capitalism's move to a more advanced stage that challenges our representational capabilities. Things have grown too vast and intricate. "In the widespread paralysis of the collective or social imaginary, to which 'nothing occurs' (Karl Kraus) when confronted with the ambitious program of fantasizing an economic system on the scale of the globe itself, the older motif of conspiracy knows a fresh lease on life, as a narrative structure capable of reuniting the minimal basic components: a potentially infinite network, along with a plausible explanation of its invisibility..."<sup>71</sup>

By contrast, an emerging generation of speculative philosophers—including Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, and Levi Bryant—give primacy to the ontological over the political to argue that this feeling of being denied the entire picture is merely a corrective to our inflated sense of self: we feel that the world remains partially concealed from us because in fact it is. Things have no obligation to disclose themselves to us in their fullness. They are thick in the sense that they are more than the relationships that they maintain with us. We are—horror of horrors—not the center of the universe around which everything revolves.

Nicolas Lobo's sculptural practice is predicated on chasing the inaccessible and the intangible, on stalking things that are elusive or knowable only through distant, second-order representations. In addition, it attempts to translate these "immaterial" or "invisible" things, citizens of territories beyond our cognitive realm, into physical volumes and forms. Deep down, his project is epistemological. It is tentatively poised between the ontologically withdrawing objects of the new speculative philosophers and the emerging variations on old political schema that refuse to fold, like nearly everything else, in the face of neo-liberalism's leviathan machine.





For *Metro panorama*, 2001, one of his very first projects, Lobo produced a quarter-inch by seventy-six-foot photographic image of the entire length of Miami's Metrorail. It is, of course, impossible to view the entire rail system at once. The Metrorail stretches twenty-one zigzagging miles, weaving in and out of neighborhoods. We only know it in fragments. Although the early Metrorail project is somewhat rudimentary, it already discloses key aspects of Lobo's practices that have remained crucial as his work has grown in complexity: the impulse to track things that exist at the edge of our cognitive grasp, to diagram a world that exceeds the reach of our internal apparatuses of sensory data collection. It reaches back to the original cartographic impulse to give manageable representation to territories often so vast and new as to be literally unfathomable.

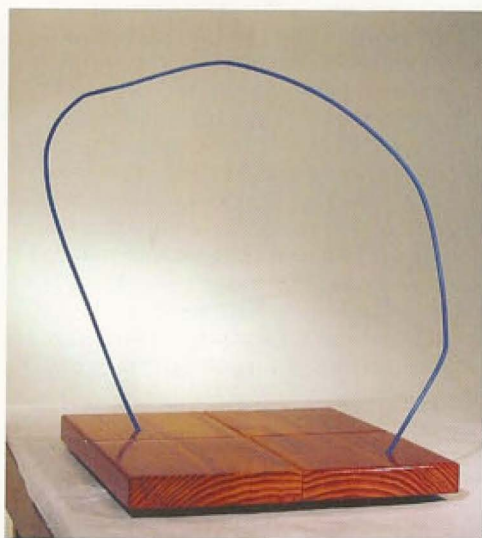
Flirting with the "invisible" takes a more sophisticated turn with *ADIZ Doppelganger*, 2005, *Flight 592 trajectory*, 2006, and *EMF displacement*, 2006. Here, Lobo gives physical form to "immaterial" entities such as the no-fly zones, flight patterns, and electromagnetic fields. In *Flight 592 trajectory*, Lobo uses a thin rod dipped in plastic to produce a 3-D model of a diagram tracking the course of the ValuJet 592 flight that crashed in the Florida Everglades in 1996, en route between Miami and Atlanta. Lobo's modest tabletop wire sculpture,

behaving like some modernist line-abstraction, almost collapses under the magnitude of the event it "depicts." But in managing to capture this event, even as it strips it of all the qualities that could make it recognizable, the sculpture—an index of the catastrophic event and its intricate web of consequences on the legal system and the media—is an allegory that addresses our contemporary precariousness. Today, the forms of representation that are available to us fail to equip us to grasp the world. Rudimentary, they are unable to provide images for a world that unfolds in relation to demands generated by abstract profit charts, projective economic plans, globally-interconnected markets, corporate cultures, and undisclosed political alliances. Likewise for their ability to account for natural processes and states, such as quantum speeds, micro-molecular levels, pre/post-human timelines, and massive geological shifts, which occur beyond our everyday purview and absolutely determine the shapes of the world we inhabit.

Invited to produce an installation in situ at Locust Projects in 2006, Lobo mapped the electromagnetic field of a nearby substation. After feeding a series of measurements into a computer to produce a 3-D model of the field, the artist reproduced this model as a room-size sculpture made out of balsa wood rods. On its own, the sculpture looked like a

PAGE 1: Nicolas Lobo, *Exhibition bench*, 2009, Corten steel, terrazzo, Rhino coat, 8 x 2 x 2 feet [courtesy of the artist and Charest-Weinberg Gallery, Miami] / OPPOSITE AND ABOVE: Nicolas Lobo, *Cough Syrup Play-Dough Diorama*, 2007, sheetrock, spray texture, cough syrup, Play-Dough, 8 x 8 x 4 feet [courtesy of Twenty Twenty Projects, Miami; photo: Jason Hedges]



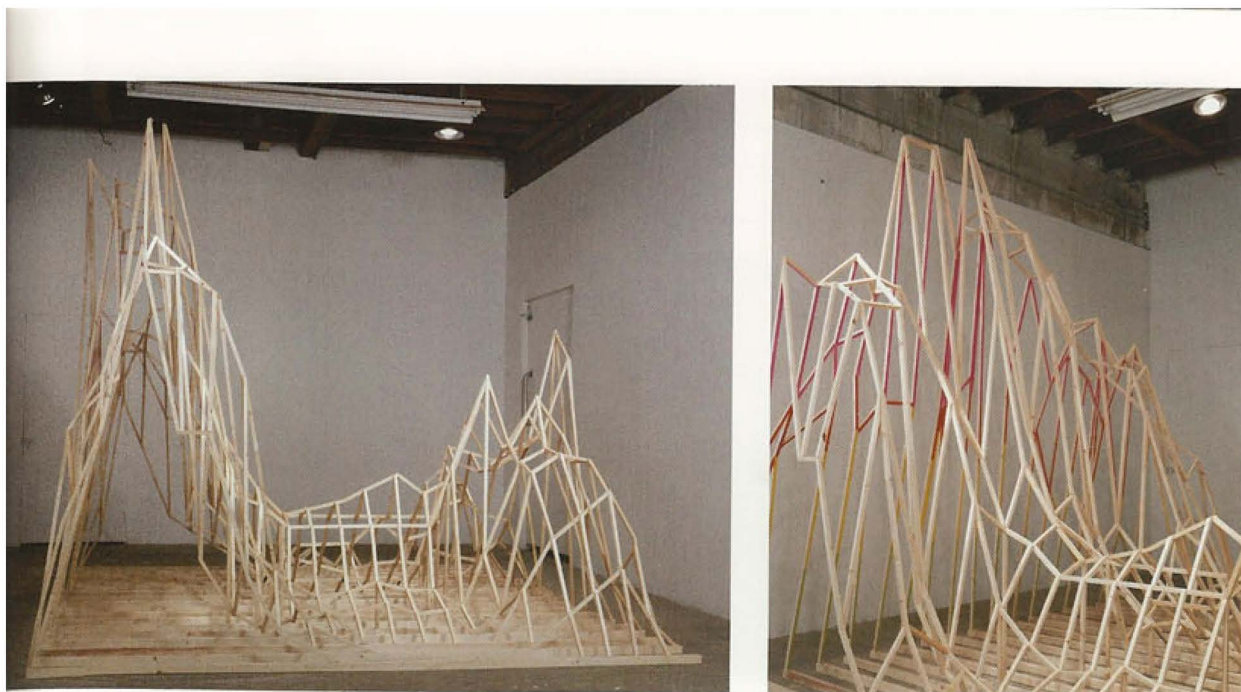


skeleton for an urban sci-fi film set or a jagged crystal mountainscape. The undersides of the wooden rods were lined with variously colored tape, each intended to represent the different electromagnetic intensities revealed by the computer model. *EMF displacement* is all information—data of the forces that zoom and buzz about us even if we have no sensorial access to them. The active matter that surrounds us—which we unimaginatively call “emptiness”—is here diagrammed for our incredulous eyes.

In these projects, Lobo chases and gives form to the spectral realities—spectral insofar as they find their “natural” spaces beneath our threshold of visibility—and invisible materialities that increasingly shape our world. The quaint term *infrastructure* used to represent these materialities. These days, however, they demand such an expansive definition that we may need a new word. From biometric data collection to electrical grids, from information networks to gas lines, from oceanic trading routes to stock indices, from ATMs to disembodied but lethally real perimeters—the world is increasingly organized by forces, flows, and restrictions that aren’t there in some fundamental empirical sense, but whose effects are undeniable and definitive, more real in the misery and regulatory cultures that they deliver than the physical and quantifiable masses that populate the world.

At first glance *ADIZ Doppelgänger* is merely two burgundy biomorphic sculptures sitting on pedestals upholstered with green leather. They certainly rhyme with the kind of synthetic, cartoony abstraction that has been making the rounds lately. Each sculpture, however, is a scaled-down, physical rendering of the atmospheric volume that makes up the no-fly zone over Washington, DC. Here again, Lobo attempts to translate concepts between seemingly incompatible languages—the diagrammatic into the sculptural; the spectral into the physical. Diverse extraneous information has to be introduced as explanatory text to fill the lacunae that open up in translation. Doubling is also a significant process here, highlighting that the sort of repetition at play may be nothing but difference—the diagram as sculpture, the insubstantial no-fly perimeter “fence” as physical object. In their sameness, the two sculptures reinforce their inability to

ABOVE, TOP: Nicolas Lobo, *Metro panorama*, 2001, photograph, 0.25 x 76 feet [courtesy of the artist and Charest-Weinberg Gallery, Miami]; ABOVE, BOTTOM: Nicolas Lobo, *Flight 592 trajectory*, 2006, threaded steel rod, wood, Plasti-dip, and felt, 4 x 4 x 4 feet [courtesy of the artist and Charest-Weinberg Gallery, Miami]



truly diagram what they embody. Each sculpture is here a doppelganger of the other as much as of the no-fly zone. Like all doppelgangers, it signals that differentiation and multiplicity are inevitable, even within the world's limited morphological range.

This doubling as reinforcement of repetition's breakdown—of repetition as a generator of difference—recurs in *Dummy Crack Doppelganger*, 2007. Made out of black foam-core and foil tape, it comprises two model-scale replicas of a gigantic public sculpture by Jean Ward located on the Miami Dade College downtown campus, an area once known for its proliferation of drug addicts. Dummy crack rocks—that is, crack rocks without any actual cocaine—were tossed on the model and allowed to roll off its sloping planes. The arrangement of crack rocks marks the self-evident pattern of objects falling at precise angles and speeds. But, perhaps more importantly, Lobo seeks to convey another kind of information: as a formal arrangement of planes, the public sculpture seemingly negates the social realities of its context. This information, however, needs charts and studies to have any scientific standing or institutional value; it needs to be supplemented by a series of disciplinary rituals and tools. Here, Lobo has presented the generally-known fact that this sculpture's folded planes have seen much freebasing in a way that

speaks to the fact that it's something akin to "common knowledge," which is almost the inverse of knowledge. Common knowledge can't be used in legal proceedings and zoning hearings or presented to university officials and police departments. It's to knowledge what dummy crack is to crack, a stand-in without the power to unleash the same effects. Official knowledge—with charts, graphs, and expert signatures—and common knowledge are a kind of repetition that doesn't quite repeat. Both may present the same set of facts but their value isn't equivalent. The "split" between them is like the gap between our cognitive machinery and the range of matter and energy that it can't quite access. This is not a question of the split between the thing itself and the picture we can conjure up but rather it is about the gap between our pictures and elements that exceed picture-making abilities altogether.

Starting off with a crime-scene photograph of a meth lab, *Cough Syrup Play-Dough Diorama*, 2007, reproduces the content of the image by using material that is central to the depicted event, even if it is nowhere to be seen: the ingredients used to make crystal meth. Buying enough cough syrup to get himself in trouble, Lobo mixed it into a fifty-gallon batch of homemade Play-Doh—whisked flour and water—and produced a diorama of the crime-scene photo. The pho-

ABOVE: Nicolas Lobo, *EMF displacement*, 2006, wood, cyanoacrylate, and colored tape, 8 x 8 x 12 feet [courtesy of the artist]





topographic representation was reproduced as sculpture in order to make it reveal all that it renders visually unavailable—the crime itself, the physicality of the depicted environment, and the evidence. In the process, however, the crime scene became something else: a kind of blobby-drippy sculpture—think intersection between Franz West, Erwin Wurm, and Southern white trash, that is, Vienna meeting cracker Florida, and you're in *Cough Syrup Play-Dough Diorama's* aesthetic territory. Something, as always, is lost in translation. Things morph as they migrate to different language systems, and this may not be a bad way to consider the crippling effects of our own habitual modes of representation when we attempt to map the forces and flows aswirl around us—a tool incompatible with its field.

More recently, Lobo has been attempting to give physical form to objects intended to exist only in virtual space. *Exhibition bench*, 2009, is an object literally taken from Google's design program SketchUp. The program comes with a series of stock artifacts used to highlight the function and dimensions of a designed space. Like the old stenciled shapes architects used to employ to signal a toilet or a door, a stock bench is a tool that makes a space's dimensions easy to grasp and shows how things may be arranged in it. Since spatial design is what matters for SketchUp users, these

stock objects are sized to feel visually right rather than to be spatially accurate. Using terrazzo and recycled plastic, Lobo rendered literal one of these benches. Needless to say, the bench feels slightly off. Its dimensions and morphology are just slightly wrong. Not enough to make the object non-functional or surreal, but enough to endow it with a slippery lo-fi uncanniness.

The bench, however, is more than the story of its source or its elusive weirdness. It's a portal or a stand-in for that entire new "space"—our cyber-expanse—that has opened up and in which we live most of the time even if there is no there there. The bench is a native specimen drawn from this insubstantial territory, this no-where with all-too-real consequences. It is data translated into thing. The whiff of weirdness is there to remind us of the loss that occurs as objects cut across fields and are filtered through translating procedures.

Although my analysis of Lobo's practices has revolved around the loss of information that occurs in translation, at the interface between one medium or language system and another, I must also account for the gains generated. After all, Lobo is putting new forms in the world—or at least physical approximations or models of realities that defy our usual notions of form; morphologies that are determined by

ABOVE: Nicolas Lobo, *Dummy Crack Doppelgänger*, 2007, foamcore, gaffers tape, aluminum foil, and simulated crack cocaine, dimensions variable (courtesy of the artist and Twenty Twenty Projects, Miami)



the invisible materialities—infrastructure, rumor, energy flows, political decisions, and so on—that increasingly govern our configurations of the world. Although his objects seem to withdraw in the presence of increasing amounts of information about them, they also play at full disclosure on a different register: they reveal instances of a world which we can no longer map with the same old tools. They give us a future—a now—through which we will increasingly move, groping for its contours with burnt-out analogue nerve endings and antiquated representational strategies. Our destiny is a kind of blindness and these objects are instruments of a future pedagogy.



#### NOTE

1. Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992, 9.

Gean Moreno is a Miami-based artist, curator, writer and Contributing Editor of ART PAPERS.

ABOVE: Nicolas Lobo, *Exhibition bench*, 2009, Corten steel, terrazzo, Rhino coat, 8 x 2 x 2 feet [courtesy of the artist and Charest-Weinberg Gallery, Miami]