



Rubens Mano, *Pavement*, (detail) 1999.

## Rubens Mano on Light and Power

LILIAN TONE

For *Pavement* [Calçada], the artist Rubens Mano (born São Paulo, 1960) installed electric outlets next to a sidewalk in downtown São Paulo during six weeks in July and August of 1999, making electricity available to anyone twenty-four hours a day for the duration of the piece. Inverting the usual notions of what belongs inside and what belongs outside, this simple operation radically changed the dynamics of life in the street. Because of the ramshackle appearance of the industrial ducts that the artist extended somewhat erratically over the façade of the adjoining building, suspicious passersby kept asking the artist whether the authorities were aware of what he was doing, as if he were stealing electricity (the organic configurations of the ducts resembled the furtive water and electricity connections commonly found in self-built housing throughout the city.) Perplexed by the availability of free electricity, most found themselves unprepared to benefit from the offer. But the work did not exist solely as a potential offer. Some entrepreneurial street vendors did use it to expand their services and sales pitches, while homeless people cooked and installed electric lamps on the sidewalk. A popcorn vendor took advantage by hooking up a spotlight and extending his working hours late into the evening.

Invited by the Oficina Cultural Oswald de Andrade to produce works *in situ* with the collaboration of the institution's students, Mano created four installations in addition to *Pavement*, under the overall title of *f:(lux)os*. Each project was named after its site – *Pavement*, *Basement*, *Roof*, *Sewer* and *Wall* – and involved, as the overall title suggested, both the material and symbolic use

of light and power, and affected, in quiet yet resolute ways, the flux of the city. As Mano explains, the district of Bom Retiro, where the Oficina is located, is one of the oldest parts of São Paulo, and has been somewhat neglected in recent decades, despite a history of intense commercial activity. The Oficina was created to revitalize the area and provide a number of activities to its residents. Mano felt a gap between this intention and the actual reach of the institution, and proposed works that extended its impact beyond the limits of its building, in an attempt to reduce the distance between the institution and its intended public.<sup>1</sup>

Especially evident in *Pavement* and *Sewer* is Mano's interest in the tense and conflicted nature of the connections between public power and public good. Marked by an interest in impermanent situations and fragmented experiences, Mano's work has been focusing since 1984 on light as a primary subject and tool, extending this attention towards the related areas of photography and architecture. The issue of site specificity is discussed in updated form, conceived as an intervention that is, in the artist's words, "fluid and discursive," rather than "fixed and directed."<sup>2</sup> In this respect, the work of Michael Asher, who sees himself as an author of situations, not of the elements involved in them,<sup>3</sup> comes to mind. Asher's rearrangement of the Kunsthalle Bern's radiators in 1992 provides a parallel with Mano's *geometry of time* 1998/99, in which the artist added to the already busy array of electrical conduits criss-crossing the ceiling of São Paulo's Paço das Artes, transforming what were previously only distracting features into a vast viewing ground. While Asher's installations, perhaps out of ethical concerns, are marked by a withdrawal of visual pleasure, most of Mano's works embrace beauty as a powerful tool, without detriment to their insistent responsiveness to the unique geographical, social and temporal set of conditions of the chosen site. They often mesmerize viewers with their blinding nature, mixing lyricism with science fiction, while retaining a certain ambiguity by visiting the limits of visibility. The otherworldly appearance of works like *Detector of Absences* (1994), *São João Receives São Paulo*, and *White Cue* (both 1999) invents a place where before there was none, both unobtrusively and ubiquitously.



Rubens Mano, *Pavement*, (in use by street vendor) 1999.

<sup>1</sup> Rubens Mano, email sent to author.

<sup>2</sup> Rubens Mano, email sent to author.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Asher and Benjamin Buchloh, *Michael Asher: Writings 1973-1983 on Works 1969-1979*. Halifax: Nova Scotia Press, 1983, p. 209.



Rubens Mano. *Detector of Absences*. Installation, 1994.

Vito Acconci recently distinguished the passerby from the viewer, wickedly stating that the viewer can be insulted and abused because he/she asked for it, while one has to be more considerate with the passerby. Mano's urban interventions, perhaps unwittingly, seem to parallel Acconci's belief. In a wider sense, *Pavement* also speaks to a recent fundamental shift in the role of the viewer in contemporary art, noticeable in the pervasiveness of unconventional, open-ended modes of addressing the audience. Recently, a number of contemporary artists have been showing a desire to renegotiate the relationship with the public, using diverse strategies to promote an inviting, though often perplexing,

experience. Working in contrast to the modern tradition of outraging and scandalizing the public – and unlike the didactic approach of some conceptually-based work or, more recently, several ideologically-inflected works focusing on cultural and gender politics –, these artists choose to engage the viewer in a generous, hospitable, and accommodating way. Felix Gonzalez-Torres's candy spills and stack pieces, Rirkrit Tiravanija's curry dinners, Cai Guo-Qiang's fields for flying kites, Lee Ming-Wei's massage sessions, and Minerva Cuevas's free products and services, are all examples. Their practices involve situations that promote interpersonal relations and carry them into the social realm. While ultimately true for all works of art, what is particularly evident in this kind of work is its predominant status as social fact. In other words, these works foreground real time and space, engage the specificities of the audience, and emphasize their own articulation within the context in which they are presented.

Even though this phenomenon only emerged in the last decade as a widespread occurrence, many of the issues at stake were prefigured in work from the 60s and 70s, especially those more ephemeral in nature. During that period, several artists formulated a critique of art's traditional forms, its institutional context, and its mode of audience address. They chose to focus, instead, on art's instrumentalist potential, not unlike many artists who emerged over the last ten years. Following John Cage's credo that the goal of the artist should be to provide "practice zones for fully conscious living," Fluxus artists framed life as art, operating under the assumption that, on one hand, there should be no hierarchy between artist and audience, and, on the other, that meaning was not to be drawn from the object, but from the situations provoked by it. As Yoko Ono remarked, "The object is not really the point of the work. Usually the object is just something that would take the spectator on from there." In the 60s and 70s, Latin American artists like Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica, in particular through works like her performances and his *Nests* and

other “penetrable” installations, took geometric abstraction as a departure point to expand the scope of their experimentation towards the performative, resorting to means that increasingly addressed the social and the political. Oiticica remarked in 1966, “Anti-Art, in which the artist understands his/her position no longer as a creator for contemplation, but as an instigator of creation – ‘creation’ as such: this process completes itself through the dynamic participation of the ‘spectator’, now considered ‘participator’.”<sup>4</sup>

The desire here is to make art that does not place itself in a position of authority in relation to its audience, art that establishes an antagonistic, intimidating relationship with the viewer. For these artists, neither do the works have the last word, nor is the viewer a disinterested bystander. They strive to create works that inspire the viewer to realize his or her own sense of authority, to make use of his or her rights and options, which include the option to be engaged and to contribute. The mere disruption of the viewer’s contemplative passivity brings about a measure of ambivalence. As Dan Graham wrote, “In this traditional, contemplative mode, the observing subject not only loses awareness of his or her “self” but also loses consciousness of being part of a present, social group, located in a specific moment and social reality, occurring within the architectural frame where the work is presented.”<sup>5</sup>



Rubens Mano, *Pavement*, (detail) 1999.

---

<sup>4</sup> Hélio Oiticica, “Position and Program” in Guy Brett et al., eds., *Hélio Oiticica*. Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 1992, p. 100.

<sup>5</sup> Dan Graham, *Rock My Religion: Writings and Art Projects 1965-1990* (edited by Brian Wallis). Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993, p. 190.