

Re: Antonio da Silva

The Canadian rapper Tommy Genesis is on, or slightly off, the record with an anecdote that takes place in one of Antonio da Silva's sprawling Caribbean properties, at the climax of which the host heroically saves a prominent Klimt painting from an even more prominent fellow rap musician's attack by delivering a disarming impromptu rendition of a verse from said musician's back catalogue, the rights to which da Silva has at least partially acquired since. This isn't to say that da Silva really *cares* for the art he collects, or to claim that he himself had musical talent; but if we can go by Tommy Genesis' account (whose 2016 single *Art*[1] is believed to reflect the rest of her short liason with the host), then the private persona behind the public figure da Silva sounds significantly more bearable than any shade of the guy Grimes ended up with.[2]

The artist behind da Silva, Anton Steenbock, last month invited me to his studio and showed me parts of his sprawling experimental research project. Antonia da Silva, mostly unknown to me until that day, is a billionaire Brazilian entrepreneur, transnational real estate developer and, more recently, president of the Da Silva Brokers Art Lab, one of the best-funded organizations supporting emerging artists in Latin America – including a recent program that tries to help them emerge from the current emergency.[3] Quite immediately, Steenbock's work on da Silva appeared significantly more interesting to me than similar projects I had come across in the past, be it Walid Raad's investigative work on the Artist Pension Trust[4], or the many diagrams of capitalist power structures that Bureau d'études has left us with[5]. I remember the latter, maybe unfairly, as mostly ornamental: a decorative visual language in which we would marvel at our Emperors' new corporations. And I remember, maybe wrongly, seeing Walid Raad's work at the Sharjah Biennial (along with Eyal Weizman's piece that put footage assembled by the Dubai Police, later re-released as Chris Marker's very last film[6], atop an empty tennis court[7]), wondering why in a place where the art market bubbled most wildly at the time, where art shows were opened by princesses, and sometimes shut down by kings[8], institutional critique was not only so welcome, but so *in fashion*. (The answer turned out to be rather trivial: Israelis appeared at the center of the org charts. In comparison, the Gulf Labor project was less popular in the region.[9])

Steenbock is not only on the heels of da Silva, tracing the Brazilian's path of destruction and construction across the globe, but sometimes slightly ahead of him. His tendency to fictionalize part of his subject's investments in real estate or on the art market has been subject to criticism[10], but to me seems like the greatest advantage of his work. The Artist Pension Trust[11], for example, was obviously *much more fictional* than some of da Silva's more recent ventures, which Steenbock may or may not have made up. And the Emiratis were right: APT *was* a global conspiracy – to enrich a handful of curators, artists

and collectors at the expense of public institutions, plus probably a couple of folks who turned up too late to the pyramid scheme.

What I like about Steenbock's work is quite precisely that, unlike Walid Raad or Bureau d'études, who can only document *existing* networks of global corruption, he deals, at least at the margins of his work (the Burj Al Arab clone at the Copacabana comes to mind[12], or da Silva's plan to transform the Indian auction house Osian's into a Google competitor[13]), with *imaginary* capital: construction projects that nobody ever had the chuzpe to think up, along with megalomaniac art organizations whose time to come, as of today, has not reached us yet. And of course, the stuff that looks the most *fake* – da Silva's involvement in a cluster of international museums located on a to-be-terraformed artificial archipelago off the oily coast of Baku, Azerbaijan – is actually *for real*. Nothing was ever built, but in case some emerging artist wants to explore what would have been, they should ask Vasif Kortun. I don't think anyone is still under NDA ;)

Finally, the politics behind *Antonio da Silva* – for a moment assuming the Brazilian was a *work* by Steenbock, which several international law firms would of course rather swiftly and vehemently deny – seem preferable to what inspired *77sqm_9:26min*, Forensic Architecture's video piece about the killing of Halit Yozgat that was prominently on display at Documenta 14 in Kassel[14]. Because there are cases when technical analysis obscures, rather than shines a light on, the nature of power. In the case of the NSU, it doesn't need forensics to know which way the wind blew that day, and to suggest that it does foregrounds the crime at the expense of the scandal beneath it. I wouldn't be surprised if many international visitors to Documenta left with the impression that an artist group had helped solve a political murder case. (To be fair: that's a systemic problem, rather than a problem with a specific work of art.) What Steenbock does with Antonio da Silva is critical, but his work is inventive rather than investigative, and it doesn't have the form of a tribunal. To me, that day in Steenbock's studio, his work appeared as a utopian fiction about, maybe even from, a possible world of ours in which art spaces – and the occasional real estate fair that Steenbock has enriched with fake *da Silva* booths – display art, rather than power, while the courts do their job and clear the cases. Which in the case of Antonio da Silva, who is not a Nazi, but a wealthy Brazilian who may have – disclaimer: or not! – made his own seed funding in sectors of the economy that tend to produce dead bodies in depressingly large numbers, will only be a matter of time[15]; in other words, it will most likely never happen.

Robert Luxemburg, July 2020

- [1] <https://genius.com/Tommy-genesis-art-lyrics>
- [2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elon_Musk#Family_and_relationships
- [3] <http://www.antonsteenbock.net/da-silva-brokers-art-lab/covid-21>
- [4] <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/48/60038/walkthrough-part-i>
- [5] <https://bureaudetudes.org>
- [6] <https://iffr.com/en/2019/films/stopover-in-dubai>
- [7] <http://sharjahart.org/sharjah-art-foundation/projects/face-scripting-what-did-the-building-see>
- [8] <https://www.frieze.com/article/sharjah-biennial-10-%E2%80%82> [review], https://rolux.org/image/SHARJAH_UAE_2011-03-24_16-45-16.JPG [installation view]
- [9] <https://gulflabor.org/timeline>
- [10] <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201612/anton-steenbock-90210>
- [11] <http://www.apglobal.org> [defunct], https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artist_Pension_Trust [outdated]
- [12] https://2019.48-stunden-neukoelln.de/sites/default/files/public/content/22007/field_coll_img/hotelblau.jpg
- [13] <https://www.osianama.com/knowledge-base>
- [14] <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-murder-of-halit-yozgat>
- [15] <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2020/03/antonio-da-silva-agendado-para-comparecer-em-tribunal.shtml>