
**CAO GUIMARÃES' GAMBIARRAS:
THE TACTICS AGAINST
OBSOLESCENCE**

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CAO GUIMARÃES' *GAMBIARRAS*: THE TACTICS AGAINST OBSOLESCENCE. *

Alchemy, it seems, is a concrete way to deal with sameness.

~ Robert Smithson

Recently, I witnessed a peculiar, yet absolutely ordinary and recurrent event, a universal annoyance: a wobbly table. The morning after realizing about this flaw, my host and owner of the table went immediately to one of those home-improvement, do-it-yourself retail stores, and returned with a vast array of packets with different items (circular screw caps, different types of glue, adhesive foam, etc.) with the expectation that one among them, or maybe a combination of them all, would bring back the stability to the furniture, and therefore, to the house. His capacity to respond to the eventuality was notable; however, the display of his acquisitions showed his wondering, uncertain and inaccurate mind for such specifics—the fact that he rapidly delegated the task to someone with a higher expertise in the field exposed him even more.

Seeing such an abundant variety of potential solutions—all of them still enigmatic though—provoked a certain anxiety in me. All of a sudden, such a mundane problem ramified in incommensurable and highly specific circumstances with which sort it out and return things back to normal (the more precise the response, the narrower too). The ordinary seemed critical because of this excess of options, and the shortage of clarity.

Home Depot and massive businesses of the kind seem to embody the opposite spirit of “gambiaras.” In spite of the fact that Do-It-Yourself tradition spread after the post-war shortage of labor and generalized impoverishment (Atkinson 2006:2), nowadays it exists a whole industry that exploits the desire for customization and imprint of one’s individual signature in the everyday, in addition to commercializing hyper-specialized commodities. This apparent efficacy

* In this text I will refer to “gambiaras” as a practice and mode of repair, and to *Gambiaras* as the photographic series produced by Brazilian artist and filmmaker Cao Guimarães.

and availability of solutions —highly pre-fabricated and purpose specific— constricts individual agency by subtly stirring the ambition of the upper-class tailor made. Whatever middle classes possess should be experienced as always potentially better and never enough.

“Gambiarras” are, first and foremost, moments of lucidity, yet of an oblique kind. Maybe this is the reason why Brazilian artist Cao Guimarães (Belo Horizonte, 1965), has become a “gambiarra hunter;” since 2002, when he started this photographic series. This photographer and filmmaker defines the term “gambiarra,” from Brazilian slang, as a mode “to solve problems by alternative means or granting different functions to different objects” (interview quoted in Grossi 2011). Argentinean psychoanalyst, Lucia Grossi, expands the definition, adding that gambiarras are quick fixings—an expression of a home-made taste that emphasizes a temporary condition, which ends up becoming permanent (2011). It is a Brazilian popular expression that loosely translates as “to make do” and “describe more generally the act of day-to-day improvisation” (Asbury 2008). Rodrigo Moura has emphasized the obscure etymology of the word, which has “gâmbia” (leg) integrated in its meaning, evoking the function of a crutch or provisional prosthetic with which balance is restored (Roesler 2013:6).



Figure 1
Cao Guimarães
Gambiarras # 50, 2011.
http://www.portugues.rfi.fr/sites/portugues.filesrfi/imagecache/rfi_43_large/sites/images.rfi.fr/files/aef_image/gambiarra_s_big.jpg

After completing his MFA in Photographic Studies in London in 2002, Cao Guimarães returned to his home country, and spent two months traveling throughout ten different states in Brazil. He has asserted that what was more striking for him was the expressive force of the people he met, more intense than the people in Britain. He found that everyday objects and solutions to small quotidian vicissitudes and needs best reflected such expressive force. He has commented that in first world countries a generalized attitude, favoring “disposability,” rules everyday behavior. He has been, ever since, photographing “reinvented objects” in Brazil, Thailand, Mexico, and Cuba—reinvented in order to expand their usefulness. These objects, Guimarães says, prove a distinct way “to be in the world” (Guimarães, 2013).

In Guimarães’ Gambiarras, objects are testament of an *ethos* grounded in versatility rather than specialization. Gambiarras are improvised and spontaneous repairs and adaptations performed in utensils (figure 2), things (figure 3), to elements in the architecture (figure 4) and/or in the landscape (figure 5), but always preserving a relation of scale with the human body. They are achieved by means and materials at hand, resulting in objects acquiring unexpected and tangential functions: artifacts are versatile because they can become into anything. They are sculptural situations in their own right since the interrelation of material properties (weight, balance, flexibility, elasticity, ductility, density, sharpness, emptiness, blankness), shapes (flat, elongated, rounded, square, angular, pointed), and locations in the space are at stake in the configuration of a gambiarra. Yet, more importantly, they prove an ability to respond (without speculation), of acting in the world, and living one’s life by rearranging the surrounding environment and reorganizing the relations between things. Gambiarras subvert practices of consumption; they are unadvertised forms of resistance. Gambiarras are not only artifacts but micro engineerings applied into the everyday.



Figure 2

Cao Guimarães. *Gambiarras* # 104, 2011.

In <http://artsy.net/artwork/cao-guimaraes-gambiarras-number-104>



Figure 3

Cao Guimarães. *Gambiarras*, 2002-2013. 17 ¼ x 23 ½ in.

In <http://www.caoguimaraes.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/11-gambiarras.jpg>



Figure 4

Cao Guimaraes

*Gambiarra*s, 2002-2013

17 ¾ x 23 ½ in

In <http://www.caoguimaraes.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/12-gambiarra.s.jpg>



Figure 5

Cao Guimarães. *Gambiarra*s # 51, 2005. 17 7/10 x 23 3/5 in.

In <http://artsy.net/artwork/cao-guimaraes-gambiarra.s-number-51>

Philosopher Giorgio Agamben defines *apparatus*, after Michel Foucault, as “a set of practices and mechanisms (both linguistic and non-linguistic, juridical, technical, and military) that aim to face an urgent need and to obtain an effect that is more or less immediate” (2009:8) and he emphasizes that it is “anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings.” (14). Apparatuses are defining in any process of subject formation.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel De Certeau introduces the idea of “ ‘indeterminate trajectories’ that are apparently meaningless, since they do not cohere with the constructed, written, and prefabricated space through which they move” (1984:34); “ ‘traverses’ —that— remain heterogeneous to the systems they infiltrate and in which they sketch out the guileful ruses of different interests and desires” (34). These interruptions and forms to circumnavigate through the established structures, while at the same time deviating their expected flows and therefore not subsuming to their required disciplines, is what De Certeau call *tactics*. Tactics are means to return the agency in the aforementioned processes of subjective production. Media writer, Ricardo Rosas, describes the agency involved in *gambiarra*-ing in Brazil (not only in the artifacts documented by Guimaraes but also in a larger selection of artistic, media, and activist practices in Brazil):

[W]hether consciously or not, *gambiarra*-ing can often negate the productive logic of capitalism, stop a gap, fill a lack, balance the precarious, reinvent production, offer utopian glimpses of a new world, stir a revolution, or simply try to heal the open wounds of the system, bringing comfort or a voice to the dispossessed. The *gambiarra* is itself a voice, a cry —of freedom, of protest— or, simply, of existence, the affirmation of an innate creativity (2006:46).

Early in the 2000s, a number of international exhibitions addressed a series of social tactics and responses in everyday life within misbalanced and highly contrasted contexts—places with colonial pasts and abrupt processes of urbanization and modernization, being Latin American countries a clear the example of this condition. In 2003, Argentinian Carlos Basualdo curated a section of the 50th Venice Biennial under the title *Structures of Survival*. The curator proposed “a constellation of themes related to the effects of political, economic and social crises in the developing world,” emphasizing “notions of sustainability, self-organization and the articulation of various forms of aesthetic agency as forms of resistance” (Basualdo, 2003). Brazilian Adriano Pedrosa was guest curator of *Farsites*, which was the museum-exhibition section of the US-Mexican biennial InSITE 2005 (celebrated in Tijuana and San Diego). Pedrosa conceptualized this exhibition around “moments or loci where the grid and the system fail or fall short”; according to him these moments/loci are more evident in third-world cities “because of the lack of available public resources to aptly control them in a clean and efficient way” (Pedrosa 2005:23). “How can I find a fair distance between my neighbor and myself so that a social life is acceptable and may be possible for all of us?” was the question at the core of 27th São Paulo Biennial – *How to Live Together*, curated by Lisette Lagnado (2006:62). These last two exhibitions included a selection of Guimaraes’ *Gambiarrras*.

Gambiarrras is an ongoing series, for which Guimarães continues registering and collecting this type of random encounters wherever he travels around. In 2009, the series took the form of an artist book published by the 2nd Poly/Graphic Triennial in San Juan (PR), Latin America and the Caribbean, edited by Adriano Pedrosa. In 2008, Guimarães decided to search for the subjects manufacturing these technologies, and he produced the short film *Maestres de Gambiarra* (*Gambiarra Masters*) in which three subjects —a biology-lab technician from one

university, a neuroscientist, and a prophet— present one lesson on gambiarra-making each.¹ This film focuses more in the didactic, performative and subjective act of putting together a gambiarra; whereas the photographic series show objects that reveal their own systems and are self-explanatory (although not always at first glimpse).

In this series of photographs, Guimarães employs a selective focus and framing that highlight the shape and materials of the artifact he is depicting, while at the same time blurring or withdrawing the scene, therefore leaving the context and users of such artifact open to imagination—yet Guimarães does not abduct these objects to present them in an “artificial,” constructed and aestheticized display. A toothpick stuck in a potato serves to hold the orders of what, speculatively, seems to be a restaurant (Figure 6). A discarded compact disk functions as a reflective screen to increase the lighting of a space; three diffuse yellow bottle caps and three buckets (?) lined up, make us think also about a place where food is cooked or served (Figure 7). These images are also highly evocative and poetic, reminding us about Lautréamont’s description of “the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella!”. A squared dice swaying over the arm of a turntable, apparently lost in a planet of rounded forms, as the picture shows, enhances the idea of this random shipwreck (Figure 8). However the meeting of these disparate objects is not the result of chance (or only chance); what brings them together is a purpose and function in mind—a practical force at stake. The otherwise “drifting” dice, is a key component in this system; both its weight and lightness allows for the precise touch of the needle on the record and, therefore, for an optimum sound.

¹ *Mestres da Gambiarra*, 2008. Dir. Cao Guimarães. 30 minutes, digital video, color, stereo. Featuring: Darcy, Sérgio Neuenschwander and Paulo Marques de Oliveira.

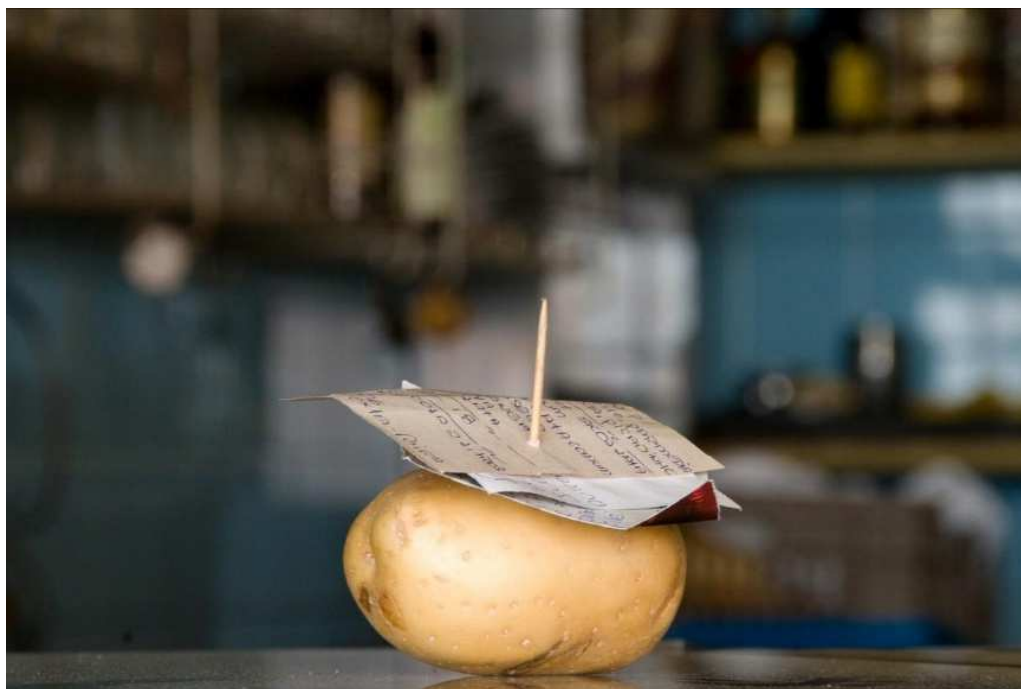


Figure 6

Cao Guimarães. *Gambiarra* # 83, 2008. 26 x 39 2/5 in.
In <http://artsy.net/artwork/cao-guimaraes-gambiarra-number-83>



Figure 7

Cao Guimarães. *Gambiarra*, 2002-2013. 17 3/4 x 23 1/2 in.
In <http://www.caoguimaraes.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/14-gambiarra.jpg>



Figure 8

Cao Guimarães

Gambiarrras, 2002-2013

23 ½ x 17 ¼ in

In <http://www.caoguimaraes.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/25-gambiarrras.jpg>

In *Music and the Everyday Life*, Tia de Nora exposes the theoretical debate around *technologism*, which is the political dimension of objects as structuring forces that configure social relations and social action. At the center of this discussion is the differentiation of objects being compelling, prescriptive, or descriptive about their uses, as De Nora points out; and consequently, about the actions, behaviors, and interrelations that they allow for or, furthermore, dictate—if we conform to the “technologistic” approach (2000:34-36). Jacques Attali demonstrates a technologistic position, when he defines the society of mass production that emerged late in the nineteenth century as one driven by the consumption of replications (1985:88).

However, *Gambiarrras* as a documentary project complicate this Marxist politico-economic perspective, by evidencing the detachment from prescribed uses and normative notions of use and obsolescence, and the corresponding attitudes in this regard. *Gambiarrras* constitute a

paradigm of queering tactics in the everyday, which are also responses to contingency.

Gambiarras show artifacts that are not experienced as attached to a single functional identity and to any particular logic. Their rationale is always relational, contextual and collective: it is therefore systemic. Gambiarras are systems of relations emerged amidst contingency (Figures 9-11).

Some images in Guimarães' series present objects connected, almost tangled and messy. By looking more carefully it becomes clear that is not a random and chaotic disposition what we are attending, but a very precise relationship of sizes, forms and angles. The two horizontal structures of the steel chair that lacks of its seat embrace with precision a wheelbarrow lacking one-handle and wheel. A tilted wood board operates the distance between the heat produced by the ignited charcoal and the portion of meat in the fork, allowing then for variations and qualities in the cooking of food.



Figure 9

Cao Guimarães. *Gambiarras*, 2002-2013. 17 ¾ x 23 ½ in.

In <http://www.caoguimaraes.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/04-gambiarras.jpg>



Figure 10

Cao Guimarães. *Gambiarras # 105*, 2008. 26 × 39 2/5 in.
<http://artsy.net/artwork/cao-guimaraes-gambiarras-number-105>



Figure 11

Cao Guimarães.
Gambiarras, 2002-2013.
 23 1/2 × 17 3/4 in.
 In <http://www.caoguimaraes.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/15-gambiarras.jpg>

All *Gambiarras* are arrangements performed using the most elemental tool: human hands (also the preeminent medium for caressing). Knotting, pressing and pinching, piling, balancing and strutting, fitting and plugging into, sticking, and hanging are tasks carried without the use of secondary paraphernalia. “Gambiarras” are devices made accessible and functional by bodily-means. Ricardo Rosas highlights Bruce Sterling’s historical transformation of mankind from producers and users of artifacts, to clients using machines that substitute artifacts, to consumers “as the machines became products by agency of distribution, commercialization, and anonymous, uniform mass production” (Rosas 2006:49).

What Guimarães registers is an everyday of “delegated” technological complexity being challenged. The use of the term delegated here is deliberately ironic. We, ordinary people, are driven through a technological race. On one hand, we are urged to keeping pace and being constantly learning about the devices that construct and preserve forms of sociability and organization (Foucault would call this form of learning and organization *discipline*); on the other, we do not produce or transform those technologies—we do not own them, they own us. Yet being technological consumers, constantly adjusting to the speed of commoditization, is what is acknowledged as the pursuable “civilizatory” impulse and also as true knowledge. As Rosa Martínez states:

[The] “effort,” based on the omnipotence of reason, its technologies and discourses, has led the West to dominate the world, that is, to know it, to map it, and to exploit it. The current trend of economic globalization is based on two hegemonic discourses: that of capital, which proclaims the joys of consumption and the optimistic fantasy of free circulation of goods, and that of science, which is based on experimental systems that seek verifiable and objective truths. (...) They both phagocytize critical inquiry that looks

for existential, economic, artistic, and social alternatives, which is to say political alternatives. (Martínez, 2006:169)

Such notion of civilization and progress is driven by a cruel Thanatos impulse, manifest in the constant replacement and substitution, of the non-new for the always ephemeral new. In *Wasting Away*, Kevin Lynch provides an illuminating example of this: “In the early 1970s, the United States, with a 6 percent of the world’s population, consumed one-half of the world’s production of raw materials and produced 70 percent of the world’s solid waste (...). The champion generators of waste are the military: there are thousands of square miles of wasted war material, sitting in the in the US desserts” (1990:49). This author suggests that the very ontology of the urban sphere is the production of waste. He writes “The filthy cities of history, which sat in a clean countryside, are succeeded by clean cities encircled at some distance by their wastes (1990:45).

As it has been discussed earlier in this text, Guimarães is interested in the assertive responses amidst contingency: how subjects apply divergent knowledges, in order to sort out the furtive malfunctioning, and how objects reveal an unexpected efficacy that prevents what otherwise could turn into calamity. But this photographer is also attentive to such liminal territories described by Lynch: the encirclings containing the urban. These borders might not necessarily be geometrically drawn perimeters but phenomenal *loci*. In such *loci*, the rampant excess of supply and the hyper-speeded squandering is an indirect reality, yet one that exert specific effects. I do not intend neither to fetishize nor dismissing poverty as a fact. It is clear that gambiarras also happen out of scarcity and constricted material conditions. Yet these images prove gestures of resistance against obsolescence, ideological marginalization, and self and subjecthood abandonment. Objects do not exist as bricks of a present ruin; instead their lives are expanded, transmuted and preserved—they expose an Eros impulse at stake.



Figure 12

Cao Guimarães. *Gambiarras*, 2002-2013. 23 ½ x 17 ¾ in .

<http://www.caoguimaraes.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/16-gambiarras.jpg>



Figure 13

Cao Guimarães. *Gambiarras*, 2002-2013. 17 ¾ x 23 ½ in.

In Pedrosa, Adriano and Dunn, Julie (Eds.). *Farsites* (catalog), San Diego/Tijuana: San Diego Museum of Art/Centro Cultural Tijuana, 2005.

*What is in the work becomes socially real as it becomes part
of the actually stated discourse between people.*
~Martha Rosler

Guimarães describes with an analogy three forms in which he produces his works. The first consist in contemplating a lake, and responding to sudden events happening in that lake, which he finds as having a poetic potency that he can not dismiss. The second method consists in throwing a stone into a lake, and producing certain turbulence; such a stone is a proposition or a concept. The third implies diving into that lake; it is an immersive experience that takes longer (Guimarães 2011). *Gambiarras* correspond to the first kind of method.

The unclaimed authorship of gambiarra technologies deceives us by obliterating the authorship of the images. However there are very specific choices made by Guimaraes which states his position towards these everyday anti-heroic acts, and creates a particular epistemological milieu for these artifacts.

This series and investigation emerge out of curiosity and identification of distinct forms of production. The Brazilian photographer has asserted “I am a terrible ‘gambiarrista’” (Guimarães 2013), meaning that he is not an apt and cleaver manufacturer of these articles. Joseph Kosuth has enounced “art means praxis, so any art activity, including theoretical activity is praxiological” (1993:19). Guimarães practice is that of using images as devices for analysis and constructing a vocabulary with which communicating the episteme and political force of these —apparently—irrelevant everyday acts occurring under the most ordinary conditions.

Guimarães employs the photographic medium as evidence, not of an isolated event that therefore becomes categorized as a “phenomenon” (an anomaly that disrupts normality), but one of a mode of living. Curator Cristina Freire has asserted “frequently the work of the artist resembles that of the archivist who collects and records the most diverse signs of cultural

production” (Lagnado, 2006:119). In order to produce such a shift in the epistemological structure, Guimarães makes use of the collection as medium, and create his items via a series of visual and compositional choices that grow into visual tropes. In regard to the collection, Susan Stewart writes:

The collection is a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context. (...) Yet unlike many forms of art, the collection is not representational. The collection presents a hermetic world: to have a representative collection is to have both the minimum and the complete number of elements necessary for an autonomous world—a world that is both full and singular, which has banished repetition and achieved authority (1993:151-152).



Figure 14

Cao Guimarães

Photographic mosaic of *Gambiarras Series*, 2008

45 photographs

In http://www.gf.org/system/assets/0000/0791/fotografia_07_f01CAO_Gambiarras_Mosaic_.original.jpg

Not only in *Gambiarrras* but in all his work, Guimarães delves into the problematics of documentary practices and the politics of representation at play; he is aware of the disruptions and performative dynamics incited by introducing a camera in a given situation, with the naïf intention of capturing something endorsed as “authentic.” As Susan Stewart states “ ‘authentic’ experience becomes both elusive and allusive as it is placed beyond the horizon of present lived experience, the beyond in which the antique, the pastoral, the exotic, and other fictive domains are articulated” (1993:133). For the Brazilian photographer, gambiarrras belong where they are. They arrive in the gallery as images; they are never appropriated or replicated objects. In this case in particular, the artist responds to a long history of power exertion and dominion through the gaze, and to the construction of “objects of ethnography” (Kirschenblatt 1998) —a form of objectification of people and disenfranchisement— by concentrating exclusively in artifacts and relations between artifacts.

Gambiarrras are the result of unexpected encounters yet, as images, are thoroughly constructed either by positing (making an object to pose) to be photographed, by manipulating specific camera effects, or adding effects in post-production—but he never relocates or transfers the objects to another clinical or aseptic setting, which is not that where it exists. In these photographs, Guimarães is very cautious about what Roland Barthes has named “co-presence,” the furtive coincidence of more than one thing “happening to be there” (in the captured image), which end up constructing an event’s narrative, and also leaving room for visual drains, typified by the French philosopher as “punctum” (1981:42). In *Gambiarrras* Potencial “punctums” are precisely the self-explanatory mechanisms operating. More than documents, these images are handbooks. They reveal the inventive behind, and transform them into a transmissible technologies.



Figure 15

Cao Guimarães. *Gambiarras*, 2002-2013. 23 ½ x 17 ¾ in .
<http://www.caoguimaraes.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/20-gambiarras.jpg>

Guimarães refuses to tinge the images of any sense of vernacularism. For doing so he pays attention to archetypal objects and elements (chairs, benches, tables, glasses, pillows, windows, doors, etc.) or to those massively distributed and used (lamps, refrigerators, earplugs, light bulbs, turntables, etc.), and he leaves their surrounding elements out of focus or excluded from the frame, in order to minimize the importance of the context, therefore of any potential plot. He never registers ornamental motifs indicating an act of customization of a distinct order. Guimarães' gambiarras are always the relation between one (or more) re-functionalized object and one brought —either back or for the first time—into function. His focus is in the problem that each artifact is solving and is able to solve. This embodied and enacted problem-solving elicits empathy.



Figure 16

Cao Guimarães. *Gambiarra* 29,2005. 17 7/10 × 23 3/5 in.
<http://artsy.net/artwork/cao-guimaraes-gambiarra-number-29>



Figure 17

Cao Guimarães. *Gambiarra*s, 2002-2013. 17 ¾ × 23 ½ in.
 In Pedrosa, Adriano and Dunn, Julie (Eds.). *Farsites* (catalog), San Diego/Tijuana: San Diego Museum of Art/Centro Cultural Tijuana, 2005.

In the case of those images referring to interventions in urban settings, the gambiarras are captured in a manner that the larger scene is always obstructed (Figures 1, 4, 16, 17). This ambiguity prevents any narrative construction on the location. Yes, these gambiarras have been found in the South, but the images do not intend to produce an ethnographic study, an *a priori* localized representation, or a souvenir from the South; thus Guimarães cancels the landscape in these photographs.

Bodies are problematic, yet all gambiarras are directly related to the human bodies' scale, functions, and needs too. In a few photographs in *Gambiarras*, bodies are portrayed. From a certain perspective this kind transgresses Guimarães own rules. However, from another perspective the choices he has made preserve the character of the series. Bodies are re-functionalized artifacts and mechanisms too, they are carriers, and the artist presents them as mannequins. The photographer's alternative is avoiding subjects' face, but also full body shots. The distance of his shot is critical. He circumvents the safety of a remote (panoptical) gaze and the voyeurism of a trespassing lens too.



Figure 18

Cao Guimarães. *Gambiarras*, 2010. 26 × 39 2/5 in
<http://artsy.net/artwork/cao-guimaraes-gambiarras-number-102>

The French economist and philosopher Serge Latouche has declared that “capitalism is a system in which equilibrium resembles that of a cyclist, who has to pedal without stopping, or else he falls. Capitalism relies on constant growth otherwise it is a catastrophe. Growth has been stagnated over the last thirty years (since the first oil crisis) and we have pedaled in the void” (Elola 2013). He is convinced that an ecological equilibrium for the future sustainability of our kind is based in less production and less consumerism; and in slowing down production in order to increase labor worth, since the excess of labor supply reduces its exchange value (Elola 2013).

Seen under this theoretical lens and proposal, Cao Guimaraes’ photographic series expose daily events that are not metaphorical but literal acts of slowing down, questioning economic rationalism and efficiency. These non-epic images contest the logic of social structures that serve the combative and disenfranchising economy.

Through poetic, humorous, and intriguing images Guimarães tackles a long history of exploitative mediatization, while bringing to the center the problems of representation at stake, when attempting to show modes of being in the world that refuse the binary of center and periphery, and therefore the discourses of the ethnographic discipline.

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