

# Sugar and Speed

Dimen ABDULLA  
Fia BACKSTRÖM  
Francisco BRENNAND  
Paulo BRUSCKY  
Vivian CACCURI  
Tyler COBURN  
Jonathas DE ANDRADE  
GOLDIN + SENNEBY  
Luiz GUILHERME  
Katarina LÖFSTRÖM  
Rivane NEUENSCHWANDER  
Jean PIERRE  
Gilvan SAMICO  
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THE HISTORY OF Recife, the largest metropolitan area of northeastern Brazil and capital of the state of Pernambuco, cannot be told without the history of sugar and labour. Sugarcane originated from Southeast Asia and Melanesia, and was first introduced to Brazil in 1532, imported by the Portuguese, who intended to expand their cultivations beyond the Atlantic islands. The colony soon became the principal producer of sugar worldwide with the majority of its plantations and mills situated in Pernambuco thanks to its warm climate and fertile soil. Brazil's role in the sugar trade weakened in the mid-17th century, after the departure of the Dutch governor Mauricio de Nassau and rivalries between the Portuguese tradesmen of Recife and the sugarcane farmers of the neighbouring Olinda that resulted in the *Guerra dos Mascates* during the early 18th century. The ensuing Caribbean sugar boom, propelled by the expelled Dutch, led to declining rates of exports from

Brazil. While the country never ceased to produce sugar, it regained its leading market position only in the 1970s, during the time of "spectacular growth" and endorsed through subsidies for sugar-derived alcohol by the military regime, who aimed to achieve energy independence following the oil embargo—developments that were accompanied by an increased concentration of personal income and social segregation. Fast forward to today, despite forfeited growth since the 2008 financial crisis, Brazil is one of the largest sugar exporters and the world's lowest cost producer.[1]

The sugarcane industry decisively contributed to accelerating the economic prosperity of the country and particularly the Pernambuco region—if only for a few to share. From the outset, the European colonisers forced indigenous populations to work on the plantations, and with declining numbers of workers due to diseases introduced by the settlers and because of abhorrent working conditions, slaves were increasingly imported from West Africa. Starting in the early 16th century until the time of the abolition in 1888, an estimated number of four million slaves had been brought to Brazil to work on the sugar and coffee plantations, and in the gold mines. The economic rate of growth had become an overshadowing principle that pledged to renounce all others. And so the hastening agricultural and commercial development thrived on exploiting live labour forces.

As Paul Virilio has pointed out, the derivatives of "vitesse", the French term for speed, are "vie" and "vif", life and force: "Western man has appeared superior and dominant, despite inferior demographics, because he appeared *more rapid*. In colonial genocide or ethnocide, he was the survivor because he was in fact *super-quick* (*sur-vif*). The French word *vif*, 'lively', incorporates at least three meanings: swiftness, speed (*vitesse*), likened to *violence*—sudden force, abrupt edge (*vive force*, *arête vive*), etc.—and to *life* (*vie*) itself: to be quick means to stay alive (*être vif*, *c'est être en vie*)!"[2] Taking a set of linguistic and historical entanglements of velocity and liveliness as a

point of departure, the exhibition "Sugar and Speed" investigates the acceleration of economic growth and of somatic metabolisms as its live capital.

Faster speed is not only pertinent for the production of sugar by means of enslaved labour and mechanised work processes, but also due to its metabolic effects. Consumption of sugar has been associated with accelerated aging, as telomeres on the ends of chromosomes that protect DNA and help cells regenerate become shorter, and thus ineffective, quicker.[3] A peak after ingestion of sugar comes rapidly and fades away faster than energy from other nutrients, leaving our minds fuzzy until anew intake. Sugar also triggers the release of hormones and neurotransmitters that stimulate the *nucleus accumbens* area of the brain, which is associated with pleasure, reward and reinforcement of learning. The same area is triggered by sex, opiates and psychostimulants. Excessive use can lead to an escalation of intake (except for in the case of sex), and built-up tolerance requires the consumption of ever larger quantities to feel the same degree of satisfaction.[4]

The urge for instant gratification of somatic desires that, once spurred, demand ever larger quantities, shares repercussive parallels with expediting market economies, transport and consumer technologies. Technologies of speed, market fluctuations, neuro-psychology and ecological disaster are the vectors of Fia Backström's installation and lecture-performance titled "The growth and its perennials" (2014/2017). The work covers a range of cases from excessive consumption, to data flows penetrating our cellular operations, to pharmaceutically medicated bodies. Some historical non-causal synchronicities of acceleration in the "West" include the first medical use of adrenaline in 1896, a hormone known to increase heart and respiratory rates, the same year in which the Olympic Games were reinvented, ten years after the petrol-motored automobile was developed by Karl Benz, and at the same time when new technologies, such as electrified trains and modern telecommunications devices allowed goods and information to travel around

the globe faster and in unprecedented volumes, suggesting the overcoming of distance. Yet capitalism is contingent on distance, creating an object world into which subjects long themselves, yearning for what they do not have. The embedded promise that these gaps can be surmounted and desires satisfied through speed and consumption remains an illusion. Targets stay out of reach, replaced by new desires as soon as the previous ones are (ostensibly) met.

With the digitisation of information, its rapid distribution and omnipresent accessibility through technologies—at least in principle—desires do not only attach to physical matter. The commodification of intangibles such as air is pinpointed by Goldin+Senneby. Together with a programmer, the artists generated an algorithm that produces a price for the temperature in the city of Recife and can be downloaded as an app. It is presented alongside a speculative sound piece and the alteration of the air-conditioned temperature in the exhibition space. Concurrently, work and its conditions predominantly in middle and upper social classes are undergoing continuous transformation. How we work with and against computers forms the pivot of Tyler Coburn's video "I'm that angel" (2012—2013). The two-channel piece is told from the perspective of a content farmer, an emergent type of online worker paid to write articles based on common words in Google Trends. Dimen Abdulla's frantic text fragments evoke SMS conversations, working days, costs of living and dawning uncertain futures, while Paulo Bruscky's sculptural work addresses surveillance, fear and technologies of control as producers of subjectivity, as anticipated by George Orwell in his seminal book *1984*.

If desire and anxiety are more than ever sources of extraction of surplus value, released in data, subjectivities "fluctuate at the mercy of the mutable connections of desire with flows from all places and times that all pass simultaneously through electronic waves".[5] This "assembly line of desire"[6] distributed through the whole social body exercises a less conspicuous—but nevertheless effective—

violence than the relations of domination. Desires, struggles and lived experiences of different intensities mark the stream-of-consciousness writing of Clarice Lispector, who spent most of her childhood in Recife. **Lisa Tan's** "Sunsets" (2012) homes in on the writer and her working process. The video was filmed during liminal moments of day and night, and speaks about times of work and times of rest, temporal and spatial distances, and technologies transmuted them.

Synchronously to the growing digitisation of labour and goods, however, conflicts of land rights and slavish physical working conditions persist in sugar agriculture and particularly the production of sugar-based ethanol. The Pernambucan legacy of sugarcane resonates in **Jean Pierre's** "Cortador de cana" (1987), a portrait of a young man surrounded by a field of thickly overgrown sugar plants enclosing him from all directions, or **Luiz Guilherme's** "O homem e a plantação" (1983), a gouache painting of a peasant in northeastern attire striding with a stoop through a field of sugar crops. **Francisco Brennand**, the celebrated Recife-based artist whose studio is located in a former sugar mill, is known for his sculptural and painterly depictions of energies of floral and faunal life, and the dissolution of the divisions between humans and nature. The exhibition includes a painted close-up of a section of a sugar plant with mythological, sensual and almost humanoid qualities. **Gilvan Samico's** woodcuts often depict archaic themes of European colonisation, mysterious animals and spiritual symbols, and refer to cosmologies from the northeast of Brazil that are deeply intertwined with the natural and agricultural life of the region. The Pernambucan printmaker was associated with the Armorial Movement, a group of artists devoted to understanding the roots and folklore of Luso-Brazilian culture, resulting from the mixture of Portuguese, African and coastal Amerindian influence. Syncretic sounds of the African diaspora in continuous suspense echo in **Vivian Caccuri's** work.

The increasing acceleration of work processes since the Industrial Revolution stands

in contrast to tellural time and "natural" growth patterns. Attempts to overcome biological renitency through technologies like fertilisers and genetic engineering have depleting effects. Sugarcane fields do not only cause the decline of adjacent tropical forests but also quickly exhaust the soil they grow in—even more so when made to yield produce faster. Like sugar, these technologies only borrow speed from tomorrow. The elimination of agriculture from urban Recife following the urge towards modernisation and economic development is addressed in **Jonathas de Andrade's** video "The Uprising" (2013). The work documents a horse race through the city centre that the artist organised under the guise of producing a film. **Rivane Neuenschwander's** "Recife, setembro de 2003" (2003) consists of 30 photographs aligned like days in a calendar. Each photograph was made on a different day, while the artist was taking alternating routes to work. The images show quotidian scenes from urban Recife, from people waiting on the street, to shop interiors, to a snooker table. A different number is almost incidentally integrated in each of the pictures, possibly as a reference to making time measurable in productive terms. Contrasting slowed-down states of mind are evoked by **Katarina Löfström's** meditative video "A Void" (2013), alluding to visual hallucinations, and to seemingly unproductive modes of activity.

The exhibition taps into a constellation of questions: **If colonial and capitalist relationships rely on exploitation of others and reinforce asymmetrical dependencies, how are these reconfigured when the roles of producer and consumer become increasingly entwined—when we produce even when we consume? By clicking "like" on social media do we not only participate in the pleasure-spiral, we actually work by generating information and surplus value, possibly without knowing it other than by becoming more and more absorbed by our technologies. [7] How are those who are privileged, and those who are marginalised by and from this contemporary form of capitalism affected by it? Could dopamine-induced cycles of dependency, evoked through**

**sugar, drugs or, as lately claimed, internet use, instigate a form of endocolonialisation, an autoimmune addictive disorder—even if, for now, under less fatal conditions?**

The affirmative approach that recent accelerationist tendencies have put forward maintains that technosocial capitalist processes should be sped up and expanded to generate change by exacerbating the deterritorialisation of subjectivity to the point of collapse. The logic seems to imply that amidst the breakdown of planetary climatic stability, resource and human exhaustion, and staggering social inequality, the system should be driven towards destruction using its own accelerated methods. Yet, if reterritorialisation is an accompanying impulse, unless a (however uncertain) plane of immanence is reached, any counter strategy can be transformed from poison into fuel. Rather than stripping the gearbox down to counter-directed fastness and slowness, we need to assert numerous ever-changing, slowing down and speeding up dispositions, to divert reductionism and to account for and enhance complex and ethical modes of being.

While it may be worth considering a cultural anthropophagic approach against external dominion, more questions surge: If we are turned into self-metabolising consuming producers and producing consumers, how can we resist not only lopsided dualistic relationships of domination and subjugation, but also their conflation into one? If you yourself are your coloniser, do you cannibalise yourself? Who does this apply to and (perhaps) work for, and who is excluded from access to this strategy, whether it is useful or not? And, most importantly: Will you be fast enough?

Sited in the museum in the capital of sugar, the exhibition relates to the intertwined web of forces that reverberate across time and space into the present, such as economic growth rates, physical and immaterial modes of work, technological and metabolic acceleration, productivity and yield set against depletion, and processes of commodification in Recife and beyond. ■

## NOTES

1. Cf. Donald Mitchell (2004), *Sugar Policies: Opportunity for Change*, World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 3222, p. 20.
2. Paul Virilio (1977/2006), *Speed and Politics*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), p. 70.
3. Cf. Cindy W. Leung et al. (2014), "Soda and cell aging: Associations between sugar-sweetened beverage consumption and leukocyte telomere length in healthy adults from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys", in *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 104, No. 12, pp. 2425—31.
4. Cf. Carlo Colantuoni et al. (2008), "Evidence for sugar addiction: Behavioral and neurochemical effects of intermittent, excessive sugar intake", in *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, Vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 20—39.
5. Suely Rolnik (1998), "Anthropophagic Subjectivity", in *Arte Contemporânea Brasileira: Um e/entre Outros*, São Paulo: Fundação Bial de São Paulo, np.
6. Félix Guattari & Suely Rolnik (1986/2007), *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents, p. 16.
7. Cf. Min Liu & Jianghong Luo (2015), "Relationship between peripheral blood dopamine level and internet addiction disorder in adolescents: A pilot study", in *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Medicine*, Vol. 8, No. 6, pp. 9943—48.

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MAGALHÃES



POR VOCÊ, TRABALHANDO SEM PARAR.

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