

Terra

Infirma

Geography's visual culture

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Thus the suitcase as *supplement* of the journey, neither its illustration nor the illumination of its secret or of its true intentions. 'But', says Derrida

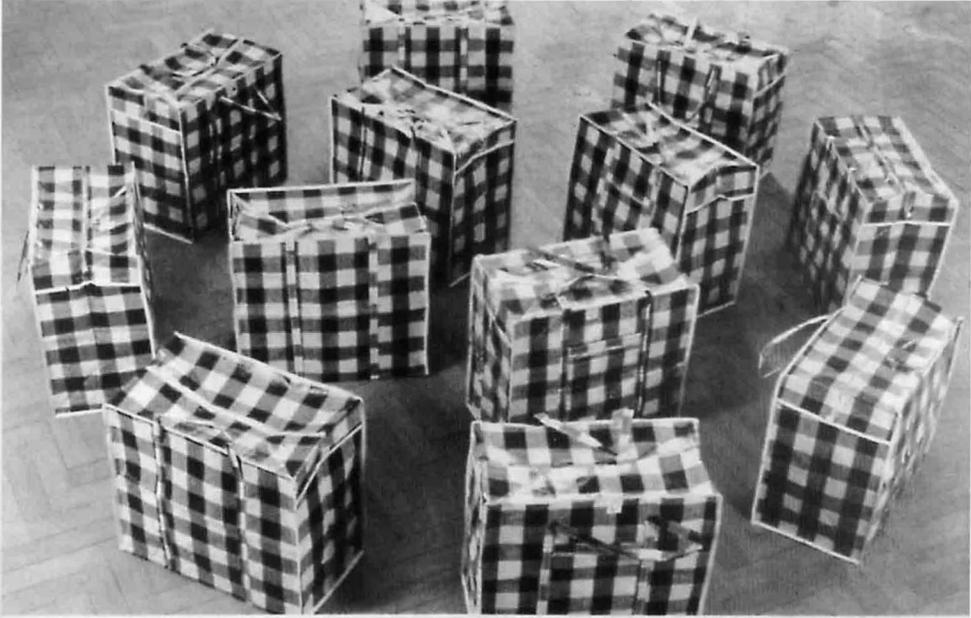
the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*: if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. if it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence. Compensatory and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which *takes (the) place*. As substitute it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by a mark of an emptiness. Somewhere, something can be filled up of itself, can accomplish itself, only by allowing itself to be filled through sign and proxy.⁷⁷

It is in this tension between something taking place and taking the place of something else that Derrida outlines that the suitcase in these works functions neither as the reality of the journey nor as its symbolic representation but is for ever sliding back and forth between these, ever vigilant in alerting us to the unspoken of travel.

That which circulates

That unspoken has a parallel presence, a more material parallel presence, within the realities and rhetorics of global circulation. Within contemporary cultural practices which use imagery to mobilize critical discourses, rather than to illustrate or theorize, we also find luggage signifying other transitions, other movements, those of human and material resources within neo-colonial ideologies. The narrative is not the old one in which a happy end of assimilation or a tragedy of an annihilated culture takes place, but one in which perpetual movement and transition – their pain, rupture, poverty and disorientation – are incessantly invoked as they are incessantly experienced.

In 1992 the conceptual art team 'Art in Ruins' placed an installation, *Conceptual Debt*, within a variety of sites, in what were both the previous East and the previous West of the city of Berlin (Figures 2.10–2.12, Plate 3). Overtly it dealt with the much-discussed and much-feared 'Third World' debt to 'First World' countries and 'world' financial institutions. In the constantly reported anxiety that the 'Third World' might renege on its large financial obligations, a certain separation began to occur between these countries, between those who have lent and those who have borrowed, a fictitiously straightforward relation of direct monetary lines of loans and



MY HOMELAND IS NOT A SUITCASE

Figure 2.10 Art in Ruins, *My Homeland is not a Suitcase* from *Conceptual Debt*, 1992. Courtesy of Art in Ruins

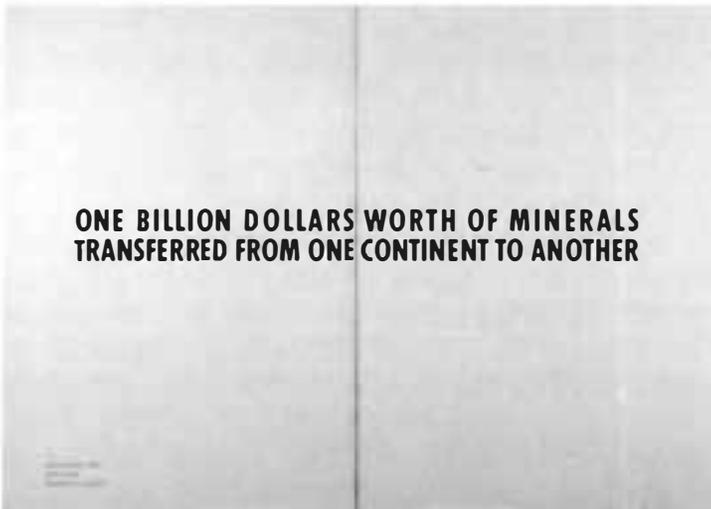


Figure 2.11 Art in Ruins, *Untitled* from *Conceptual Debt*, 1992. Courtesy of Art in Ruins

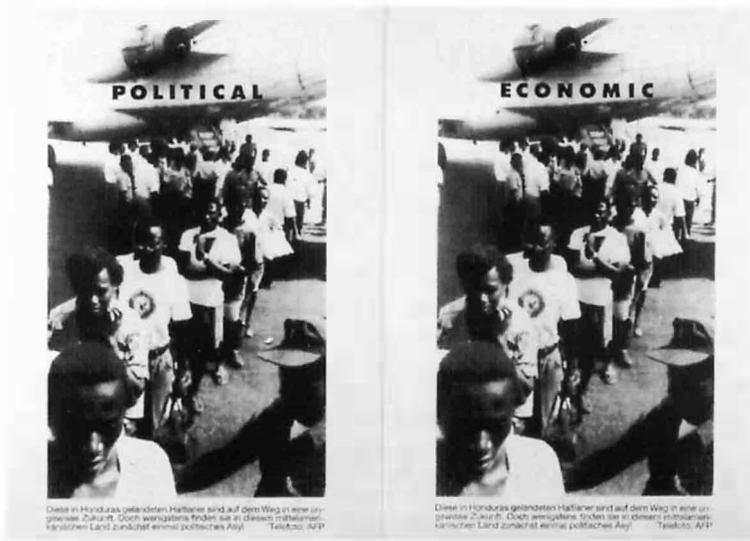


Figure 2.12 Art in Ruins, *Political/Economic* from *Conceptual Debt*, 1992.
Courtesy of Art in Ruins

their repayment. In the process of this public drama, as in the debates around the GATT and NAFTA agreements which were to follow in the early 1990s, two dimensions of this dynamic were conveniently forgotten. First, it is not only capital which circulates globally but also the actual bodies of the labor forces in its service. Second, an intentional effect of the circulation of capital from the 'First World' to the 'Third World' is the constitution of markets and consumers for imported goods or goods produced locally by multinationals run from the centers of power and profit.

Berlin in the early 1990s was a poignant moment and site in which to open up such discussions. In one city two structures of the importation of foreign 'guest workers' – in the west the foreign workers imported from Turkey, Yugoslavia and Spain at the moment of the 'economic miracle of the 1950s and in the east the foreign labor brought in through that other great colonial system, the world of communist influence, from Africa and Asia – were meeting within an economic climate of increasing constraint and unemployment. Similarly, each side of the city had been closed from the international art world for different reasons and had developed habits of the importation of art and artists from elsewhere in order to enliven its cultural climate and keep it current and connected to the so-called 'rest of the world'. The Deutsche Akademische Austauschdienst is an academic and artistic exchange program which brought numerous artists to Berlin in an attempt to maintain an international arts scene during the years of the city's division and distance from the German Federal Republic. In their installation the British collaborative team Art in Ruins (visiting DAAD artists in residence in Berlin)

combined textual statements by various politicians and 'Third World' critics and activists with statistical information and with an attempt to produce a sign language for the 'Third World' presence at the heart of the West. The collusions with an unequal exchange between these two economic and cultural spheres, an exchange of labor, resources, capital and markets and the enormous burden of the interest with which these loans are serviced, have virtually no means of signification. The 'Third World' circulates in the West as a series of pathos-riddled images of famine, poverty and disease or as the frightening specter of extreme, irrational so-called terrorist politics of rebellion or suppression. It circulates as both a collapse of every conceivable Western order and as extremely geographically distant, virtually unreachable. Representations of the 'Third World' signify as the construction of an 'over there' which invariably demands a panacea, a philanthropy, 'aid' or military intervention. It is the excessive form given to the feared and the repressed of the West's political imaginary. The degree to which that world circulates within this world, as goods and natural resources, as laboring bodies, as cultural and linguistic hybridities and indelibly linked economic systems, might be recognized and studied by economists but it is not possessed of a system or language of representation within the wider culture. Only rarely are political figures such as Richard Nixon either sufficiently candid or sufficiently cynical to state, as is quoted in this installation, 'Let us remember that the main purpose of . . . aid, is not to help other nations but to help ourselves.'⁷⁸ That kind of recognition of mutual economic and cultural imbrication and its constitution as a visible sign system goes against the very need to repress what is feared and prevent it from freely circulating amongst us as a legible and visible entity. No less invisible are the murky structures and authorities by which all this wealth and labor make their way from one place to the other. In their installation *Art in Ruins* link material and political histories to produce a visual language with stamps of 'inspection' by leading 'Third World' figures, colors of the African National Congress flag merged with an image of Malcolm X, the North American political figure who beyond all others understood the links between 'Third Worlds' and domestic oppressed minorities, between race and economy as structures of discrimination. Above all the installation is filled with suitcases and with the images of the refugees and migrants who carry them. The suitcases are the cheapest plastic chequered cases, the kind that one could purchase in every supermarket anywhere in the world, and the images are captioned with the statement that 'MY HOMELAND IS NOT A SUITCASE'. In their insistent presence these images make us aware of the degree to which the very concept of 'migrant' is a form of naturalization, of normalization of an abnormal state in order to avoid giving thought to the conditions that have produced it or which benefit by it. In making overt and audible immigrants' own denial of their

migration as a naturalized ordinary condition, as a condition that can be read through a humane empathy that masks all the clearly reversible conditions that go into its making, we arrive at a recognition of the actual circumstances and reasons for people's forced migrations, a recognition which in turn transforms 'Third World' debt into 'First World' debt. In stating that one's homeland is not a suitcase there is some headway in confronting the museumification of the suitcase as memory and nostalgia, towards establishing that it is at the cost of horrific change and disjuncture that the West's eternal 'unchange,' its permanence and continuing economic superiority, can be maintained.