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TOBIAS OSTRANDER

# *Picturing Paradise*

The mirror constructs a space, a gap within me. On its surface my self-perception faces the external me, the image that the world encounters. The mirror articulates the discrepancy that exists between these two selves. The external and internal selves that the mirror identifies continually play off of one another, define each other, and seek to articulate a unified self. The gap that the mirror creates is a site of negotiation that holds within it the possibility of, the desire for, a reconciled self-image.

To create the installation *Picturing Paradise* (2000), which was one of the site-specific projects featured in *inSITE2000*, Valeska Soares attached two sets of stainless steel mirrors back-to-back on opposite sides of the fence that divides Tijuana and San Diego. The artist chose an area of the border where the barrier is made of wire, versus an area where it is constructed of sheet metal. The wire fence allows people on both sides of the border to see one another and see into the neighboring country.

The border territory articulated by this fence is a complex space of dreams and fears, poverty and prosperity. Tijuana and San Diego are tensely intertwined; their economies and populations continually mix and refer to one another. Each city defines the other. The chaotic, dirty streets of Tijuana find their counterpart in the Navy-inspired order and cleanliness of San Diego's wide avenues. The dust of the dry desert landscape of Tijuana contrasts with the lush greenery of irrigated San Diego. The population of Tijuana looks to the United States, seeking economic opportunities and affluence, while the people of San Diego look to Mexico for such forbidden pleasures as excessive drinking, inexpensive drugs, and illicit sexual encounters.

Perceptions of the other side of the border play a role in the self-definition of individuals living within each city. The border becomes a site of habitual negotiation as the cultural norms and activities of each city's "other¨ are continually adopted or rejected. At times these interactions and interpretations can seem of little consequence, as with the adoption of American words, fashions, and products by Mexicans, or the seeking out of Mexican food, crafts, and other Mexican-style home decorations by Americans. At other times these exchanges are aggressive, with Mexicans fighting against the United States' economic and political interventions, or with the United

States suppressing Mexican cultural influences and seeking to strengthen the border's impermeability.

On the mirrors placed at the border Soares inscribed a text taken from Italo Calvino's book *Invisible Cities*. The text describes the fictional city of Valdrada, built on the shores of a lake. This location defines two cities, Valdrada and its reflected image. The text tells of how the two cities constantly watch one another, as each violent or amorous action performed in one place is simultaneously inverted and repeated within the space of its mirror image. The reflection haunts individuals on both sides of the mirrored divide, rendering them acutely self-conscious.

On one set of mirrors, the text by Calvino appeared in Spanish on the Mexican side of the border, and in Spanish printed in reverse on the American side. This structure was repeated with the second set of mirrors. The English version of the text was readable from the United States but shown in reverse in Mexico. On either side of the fence, the reversed text created the illusion of transparency, as if the viewer were looking through the mirror to the surface facing the opposite country.

The essay "Of Other Spaces" by Michel Foucault describes a contemporary society anxiously preoccupied with defining space. In the nineteenth century the concept of time was the basis of philosophical inquiries that eventually led to its demystification. Space, Foucault argues, continues to hold onto much of its sacred character within the twentieth century. However the roles and actions assigned to public versus private categories of spatial delineation have changed. Foucault describes how we define our understanding of space in terms of contingencies between specific contexts. He writes, ¨Our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites.¨[1]. Foucault goes on to define two sites—"utopias" and "heterotopias"—which characterize spatial constructions. He describes utopias as ¨unreal spaces" that present alternatives to currently existing social spaces. Heterotopias, by contrast, are sites that exist in reality, but whose presence alters relationships between other sites, creating a space through which additional sites are "represented, contested, and inverted."[2]

For Foucault, mirrors represent the juncture between utopia and heterotopia. In seeing myself in a mirror, I experience my image at a distance, in a space which I do not physically occupy. I become conscious of my own position through this alternate space. The space that the mirror defines is "a placeless place"—a utopia—in keeping with Foucault's definition. But my experience is also heterotopic because the mirror is an object that actually exists in physical space. In Foucault´s words, ¨From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself: I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself where I am.¨[3]

The complexity of Soares´s mirror installation can be compared to Foucault's use of the mirror as an example of utopia and heterotopia. Foucault's mirror specifies a site—with all of its implied social and political content—within the subjective space of the individual. It is I who face the mirror and negotiate the spatial relationships it creates, and their implications. Soares's mirrors identify a politically defined boundary as a site of self-definition. The individual positioned in front of this piece sees his or her image reflected back into the country in which he or she stands, while concurrently seeing through the wire fence into the territory beyond. The placement of the reversed and readable texts reinforces an awareness of the two distinct viewing positions that define the site.

The term utopia implies desire for another existence. *Picturing Paradise* demonstrates that, for each individual living on one side of the divide, there is another, different self on the other side, living within a different set of presumed freedoms. These freedoms can be defined as economic opportunities or release from constricting cultural norms or mores. For each population, these imagined utopias are parallel in structure but distinct in content. The utopian self visible "over there" defines the individual's position. In contrast, the heterotopic conception of self-knowledge is informed by the individual's specific location. Soares's mirrors render visible the in-

dividual's physiological and psychological negotiations of the border. As made visible in the mirrors, my internal and external selves become linked to my geographic-cultural position. These selves become part of the site's definition. The border establishes a series of dichotomies, but the person who encounters these polarities within the border-mirror inevitably seeks to unify them. This desire is played out within the additional space, the gap, that the mirror constructs.

This gap is a space of potential. From a distance, the mirrors that Valeska Soares placed on the border seamlessly reflected the sky above and the horizon line of the Pacific Ocean into which the fence enters. Walking toward the piece, these reflections created the illusion that there were two openings in the fence. The vision of two physical gaps in this barrier poignantly invoked thoughts of a unified territory, and what this unity might imply for the individuals this barrier currently keeps apart.

1 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," Jay Miskowiec, trans., in Catherine David and Jean-François Chevrier, eds., *Documenta X* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1997), 263. Originally published as "Des Espace Autres," in *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* (October 1984). The essay was based on a lecture given by Foucault in March 1967.

2 Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 265.

3 Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 266.