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CUAUHTÉMOC MEDINA

"Which dreamed it?"

When the desire to control turns to the point where it is so contaminated by desire that it loses its controlling nature, it becomes a folly.

— VALESKA SOARES

Mirrors and gardens are reminders of a world bursting with metaphysical passageways to different realms, either the double of what is before us every day, or its opposite. Mirrors and gardens can be seen as allegories of thinking, as symbols of reflection and of wandering thoughts. They are devices that can translate metaphysical notions into physical experience. As scholar Allen S. Weiss has suggested, “the mirror transforms the world into a representation, proffering a doubling of the spectator’s perceptions. Mirrors reveal a miniature, transportable cosmos, always on the verge of disappearing.”¹

Responses to Soares’s work often alternate between focused contemplation and reverie. Her mirrored environments, such as *Detour* (2002), prompt introspection, while her use of perfume engenders sensuous intoxication. In the installation *Vanishing Point* (1998), Soares creates maze-like pools of perfume that are the descendants of André Le Nôtre’s formal gardens. A creator of sensory apparitions, Soares filters the language of the baroque through the hedonistic modernism of Oscar Niemayer’s *Pampulha* complex (1940). She is interested in the oscillation between introspection and indulgence that characterizes modern subjectivity.

At the beginning of 2003, Soares built a “pavillion of desire” in Chapultepec Park in Mexico City, the park where practically all the inhabitants of the biggest city in the western hemisphere spend their childhood weekends. The installation, titled *Pure Theater*, resembled a dream fallen to earth. Soares built a fake pond, approximately forty meters wide, out of reflective acrylic. She sited the pond behind the Tamayo Museum. This artificial marvel was created in the same spot where, the year before, the artist had found a reflective pool of water left by the tropical summer storms. After taking off their shoes, visitors strolled on her “pond,” walking on their own reflections and enjoying the miraculous feeling of walking—like Christ—on water. Soares offered spectators a chance to indulge in a veritable feast of narcissism.

In the center of the pond, however, she created a melancholy site for contemplation, an object that seemed extracted from a nightmare, or a fairy tale. She constructed a glass pavillion in the middle of the pond, and inside was a life-size psychoanalyst’s couch made of cake decorated with

whipped cream. The couch was such a perfect replica that it engendered a sense of *deja vu* in some viewers. The cake was created by one of the most traditional bakeries in Mexico City, the aptly called “Pastelería Ideal,” which specializes in producing the baroque cakes that are an essential element of Mexican family ceremonies. It even had buttons and leather wrinkles simulated on its white surface. This was, indeed, a masterwork of the local pastry industry, the biggest cake ever created by the 100-year-old shop. On the one hand, the object resembled the elaborate cakes made for *quinceañeros*, the traditional celebration held for Mexican girls when they turn fifteen: it was like a wedding cake as imagined by a Las Vegas interior designer. But it was also a clever joke about the allure of psychoanalysis. Left to dry and decay for a few months in the park, the cake crumbled and stained the mirrored pond. By springtime Soares’s installation looked more like an ancient ruin on the verge of being engulfed by the third world megalopolis surrounding it.

With its references to traditional ceremonies and modern psychoanalysis, Soares’s installation became a playground on which viewers could meditate on their own subjectivity. To be sure, the artist also wished to create a mirage, a theatrical device that would “suspend the skepticism of the audience.”² She wished to counteract, at least for a time, the growing disenchantment with parks like Chapultepec, sites of civic desire that are being stripped of any sense of marvel and transformed into bland entertainment and commercial complexes.

Works like Soares’s ought to be seen as resisting the trend in contemporary art of representing “everydayness,” a trend that has resulted in mechanical gestures that merely aestheticize the banal. Soares’s theatrical interventions are an attempt to offer a non-illusionistic experience of the marvellous, without becoming “fantastic,” for the fantastic is defined by the viewer’s awareness that it is all, in fact, fiction. All the mannerisms of the aesthetic of “the oneiric,” “the magical,” or “the surreal” are useless in terms of defying ordinary ways of thinking insofar as they wind up conspiring to defend common sense: by affirming their “unreality” they wind

up implying the inevitability of “the real.” In opposition to this tendency, Soares erects stages on which we project our desires and obsessions, creating labyrinths of intersubjectivity that challenge the soulessness of contemporary urban spaces with images that seduce their viewers into a state of daydreaming.

We stroll, observe, and smell the spaces she creates, constantly prompted to reflect, to contemplate. It is not her fantasies that we consume but those that we’ve already made our own. For Alice was always right in wondering “who it was that dreamed it all.”³

The title of this essay is taken from the title of chapter twelve of Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* (1871).

- 1 Allen S. Weiss, *Mirrors of Infinity: The French Formal Garden and 17th-Century Metaphysics* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995), 85.
- 2 Conversation with Valeska Soares, March 2003.
- 3 Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), in idem, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* (London: Penguin Classics, 1998), 238.