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DOUGLAS FOGLE

*Dancers in the Dark*

The opening weekend of the XXIV Bienal de São Paulo in 1998 revealed something very important about modernism. This revelation was not found on the floors of the galleries, amongst the wonderful array of artworks brought together by its curators, Paulo Herkenhoff and Adriano Pedrosa, but on the roof of Oscar Niemeyer's Bienal Pavilion in Ibirapuera Park. One day after the opening, a ferocious storm hit the city and released a deluge of water, which proceeded to pour through the roof to the gallery floor below, forcing the exhibition to close for a number of days. That is the strange and unexpected thing about modern architecture. It leaks. Visit a Mies van der Rohe International Style apartment building on Lake Shore Drive in Chicago and talk to its tenants. They will tell you that despite the incredible views of Lake Michigan, which are magnificently framed by rectilinear fenestration, the windows do not seal properly. Of course Niemeyer and van der Rohe were hardly the only architects whose work reflects this kind of compromise between utopian ideals and lived experience. A trip to Gerrit Rietveld's 1924 Schröder house in Utrecht, for example, reveals a drafty, somewhat less than climate-controlled vision of a De Stijl "machine for living," as Corbusier termed the modern home. Flat roofs and glass façades would seem to provide an invincible, hermetic (and even heroic) barrier against the elements. However, gaps are formed where modernist architecture's right angles of structural steel meet its vertical planes of glass. This is where we see the unspoken corollary of the mantra "form follows function," as the dampness and moisture seep through the vacuum seal of our own modernist "radiant cities."

Perhaps this leakage isn't simply a matter of questionable building materials and faulty engineering. What if it is a symptom of a deeper, more systemic, metaphorical problem. Modernist architecture is subject to another kind of leakage in which water is much less of a problem than our own bodies. It is our bodies, after all, which inhabit these spaces and (in the minds of some architects) compromise them. If one follows this line of reasoning, we might see the body as a contaminant in the machine of a modern architecture with a messianic, utopian attitude towards the people that were to inhabit its structures. It is precisely in this gap between

architectural spaces and the lived reality of the bodies that inhabit them that Valeska Soares positions much of her work. Nowhere is this more apparent than in her video projection *Tonight*, in which choreography becomes a kind of phenomenological counter-architecture, and the body is transformed into a poetic irritant destabilizing the rational certitude of the modernist program.

Soares was commissioned in 2002 to produce this work as part of her one-person exhibition held at the Museu de Arte da Pampulha just outside of Belo Horizonte in Brazil. This exhibition space is located in a former casino completed in the early 1940s by Oscar Niemeyer and is part of a larger architectural complex that he designed, which includes, among other buildings, a yacht club and a church. *Tonight* was shot on location in the casino's former nightclub area and then projected onto a screen in that very space, creating an uncanny architectural doubling that was matched by the ghost-like presence in the video of dancers recruited by the artist from various clubs around Belo Horizonte. As the work opens, four partnerless figures move across the casino's illuminated dance floor, each gliding through elegantly executed dance routines alone, moving to the rhythms of a choreography designed for two people. Editing these ephemeral bodies into frustratingly close proximity, Soares never allows them to meet as they move in and out of sync with each other. Paradoxically together and yet completely alone on the dance floor, each dancer is displaced in time. The phenomenological dissonance of this visual effect is amplified by the use of a soundtrack composed of a remixed version of Burt Bacharach's 1967 song "The Look of Love," which has been altered by the Belo Horizonte sound artists O Grivo. As the dancers float in and out of the viewer's perceptual range, the fractured melody of the music mirrors their inability to connect with one another.

The choice of the soundtrack is an interesting one. The Bacharach song was made popular in the late 1960s by the British chanteuse Dusty Springfield. Her rendition of "The Look of Love" was featured in the 1967 James Bond film *Casino Royale*, a quasi-parody starring David Niven, Ur-



sula Andress, and Peter Sellers. The song itself has subsequently become something of a parody of the free love sophistication of the “swinging” 1960s. Soares’s use of the song suggests nothing of this irony. Instead, the song’s sultry vocals and the mournful notes of its saxophone seem to invoke fleeting memories of a bygone era of mid-century modernity. O Gri-vo’s electronic manipulation of the track gives it the staccato feeling of a magnetic recording caught in a tape loop as elements of the song skip, repeat, and dissolve into one another. In their hands “The Look of Love” becomes a subtly cracked mirror that eerily complements the fractured space-time continuum of Soares’s dancers. As these bodies move in and out of sync with each other and the soundtrack, it becomes clear that they do not have the ability to connect with their desired objects. The bodies are reduced to the status of ghosts in the modernist confines of the Niemeyer casino.

When looking at the way Soares uses her dancers, I am reminded of the spatial explorations in the work of the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica. In his *Parangolés* of the 1960s, the artist radicalized the practice of painting by creating colored capes and banners that had to be activated by a moving body to be completed. As Oiticica suggested, “the work requires that the body moves, that it dances, in the final analysis. The very ‘act of dressing’ oneself in the work already implies a corporeal-expressive transmutation of oneself, which is the primordial characteristic of dance, its primary condition.”<sup>1</sup> Both Oiticica and Soares’s works are linked by their phenomenological underpinnings. But where Oiticica’s work emphasizes the presence of the body, Soares’s is defined by its absence, its index, its ghostly trace. The body haunts *Tonight* and casts an ethereal presence over the architectural container that acts as its stage. Yet both artists are interested in contamination as an aesthetic strategy. Oiticica uses the body to activate his *Parangolé* in an attempt to transgress and contaminate the sanctified space of the white cube. Soares’s *Tonight* owes a lot to this strategy, but while Oiticica produces what Rosalind Krauss once termed “sculpture in the expanded field,” a term that she used to describe the redefinition of sculp-

ture beyond the bounds of traditional three-dimensional objects, Soares attacks on a different front. Her contaminant is of an audio-visual nature, combining a DJ's dub mix of sampled soundtracks with her own blend of spectral bodies to create an evocative poetics of space. In her hands the history of modernism doesn't repeat itself, it stutters. This is the leakage provided by her dancers in the dark.

- 1 Hélio Oiticica, "Notes on the Parangolé," originally published by the artist as "Anotações sobre o Parangolé," on the occasion of the exhibition "*Opinião 65*" at the Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, August 12-September 12, 1965. Reprinted in *Hélio Oiticica* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center; Rotterdam: Witte de With, 1992), 93.