

Ana Maria Tavares

Deviating Utopias

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Gordon Contemporary Artists
Project Gallery

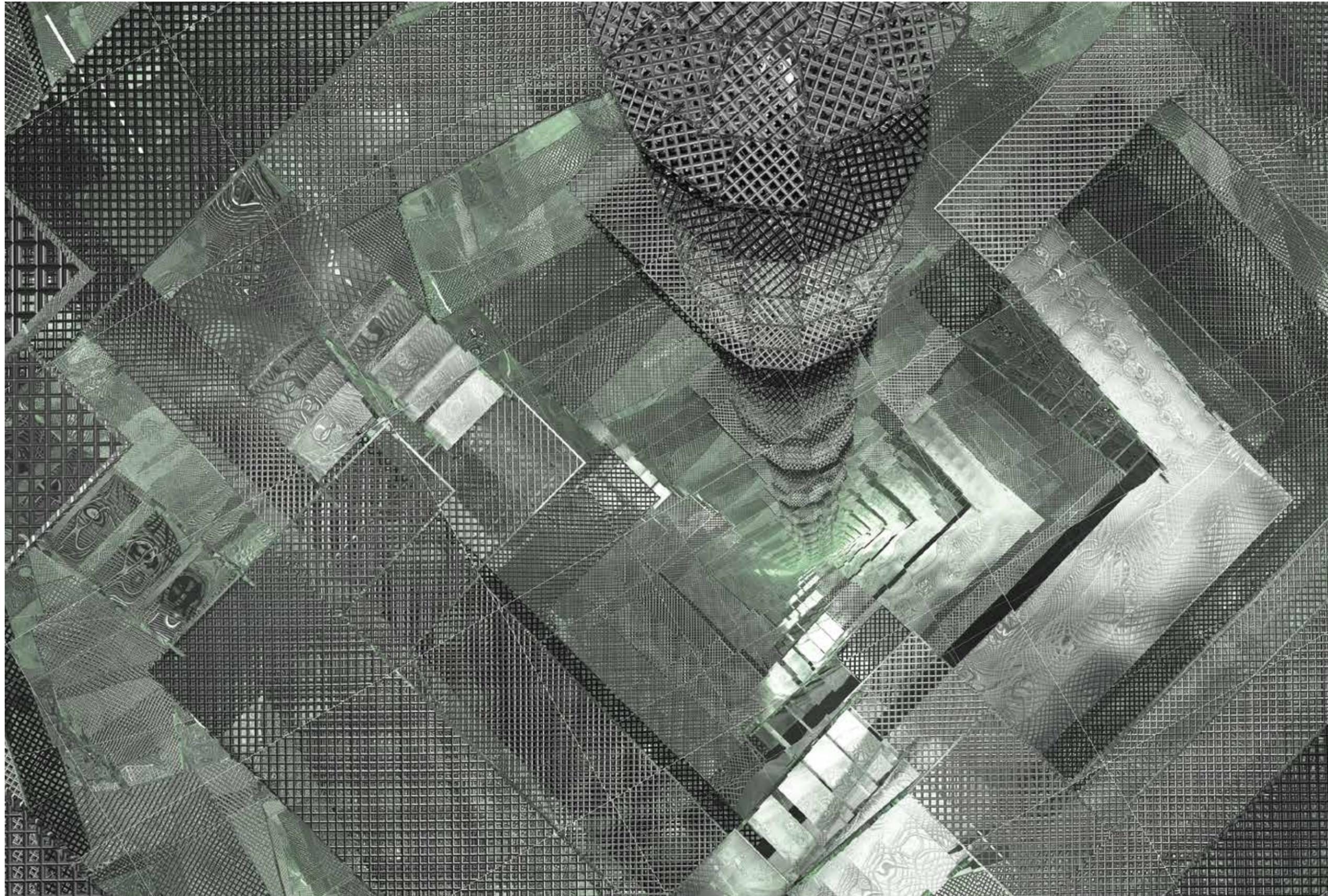
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Deviating Utopias

Today's architecture and interior design, particularly in transitional public spaces like airports, shopping malls, and corporate offices, can trigger feelings of isolation, of a separation from the familiar world and one's sense of self. Within these environments, people may see themselves in strategically placed mirrors (an experience that can seem oddly disorienting, as if they are looking at a familiar stranger rather than at their own reflections). In turn they feel themselves being watched by cameras, security officers, and others who seem equally afloat in this artificial realm. Brazilian artist Ana Maria Tavares sees in such experiences a metaphor for feelings of displacement, anonymity, and paranoia that often seem to mark contemporary existence. In her works, she deconstructs ideologies hidden within the design of these contrived environments, in Brazil and elsewhere, asking if this psychological estrangement is purposefully induced; and if so, to what end?

This interest stems from Tavares's acute awareness of the function of modernist architecture as an agent of transformation in her native Brazil and elsewhere around the world. In the 1950s and 1960s, international styles such as Constructivism and Neo-Plasticism were widely embraced by the Brazilian avant garde, who sought to provide a visual language for the aspirations of their country, particularly regarding its plans for modernization, racial egalitarianism, and centrality on the world stage. While steeped in utopian ideals, the unfolding reality has been otherwise. Tavares notes that, "In Brazil, modern architecture has been responsible for projecting the country to the world as a 'modern nation' but we have never been able to completely overcome the paradoxes generated from that project in the tropics: how can a hybrid, mixed, savage, undomesticated nature be completely framed?"¹

Tavares makes specific reference to the buildings of Oscar Niemeyer, the Brazilian disciple of Le Corbusier, which exemplify modernist architecture at its most sublime. While convinced that his structures could be a positive force of social change, Niemeyer also considered them works of art—gracefully curving, elegant, breathtakingly white—meant for contemplation as much as use. The *Eclipse* images (2010, fig.1) from Tavares's *Hieróglifos Sociais* series (2010–11) pay homage to Niemeyer's 1951 Oca Building in São Paulo's Parque do Ibirapuera. This simple white dome with porthole windows functions to this day as an exhibition space. Tavares's series consists of multiple views of the structure, digitally manipulated to convey variations in reflectiveness and transparency. The images of this stolid building show modernism as more veil and shadow than practical ideology.

Also featuring manipulated views from the Oca Building, *Pallazzo* (2011, fig. 3) offers a more striking contrast between Niemeyer's idealistic vision of a new society and the urban alienation and chaos that actually define much contemporary life in the megalopolis. The work's full title—*Pallazzo. Desviante Triple_Dia L*—includes the term *desviante*, suggesting deviation or deviantism, to convey a willful, even sexually transgressive break from the rationalist path set by the modernists. Composed of steel and aluminum gridded panels that slide to reveal a digital rendering of distorted ductwork, cables, and other elements, *Pallazzo* asks what passions the indifferent face of modernism may conceal.



Fig. 1

The convoluted images are from Oscar Niemeyer's plans for the Oca Building, which Tavares scanned and altered by adding a virtual reflective surface to their forms so they mirror each other in complex and subtle ways. They suggest both the tangled guts of a building (and one cannot help but think of the oppressive ductwork in Terry Gilliam's darkly comic masterpiece *Brazil*) and the morass of the human unconscious, reminding us of the Surrealists' fascination with the eroticism of the mechanical.

Each work in the series is named for a different motel in Rio de Janeiro that, designed as a modernist box (following the credo of form following function), was mostly used for quick sexual trysts (form still perversely following function, at least insofar as the need for anonymity dictates). The work raises questions: can the social engineering of modernism accommodate (or at least, turn a blind eye) to what Tavares calls this "parallel, deviant universe?" Or are humanity's base impulses like a virus that undermines social order? Tavares notes, "The work is constructed out of the paradoxes in which modernist rationality sees itself as contaminated by worldly things, and of the resulting diversions and possible pleasure."² If reason has no chance against desire, perhaps all we can do is to achieve stasis between the two.

Niemeyer's grandest project was the capital city of Brasília, which was conceived of by the progressive president Juscelino Kubitschek to serve as the foundation for a nation ready in the 1950s to propel itself into a future of democracy, prosperity, and international impact. This model of applied futurism, located centrally to symbolize the unification of all Brazilians, became the nation's capital in 1960. But when occupants change, the reading of architecture can change as well. In 1964, the graceful city became the seat of an oppressive right wing military dictatorship that would remain in power until 1985. Many of Brazil's leading artists, including Niemeyer, went into exile. Signifying hope and then fear, Brasília shows the capacity of our symbols to become the opposite of what they were, or to hold two meanings simultaneously.

This was impressed upon Tavares, who has vivid memories of life under the repressive regime. It made her sensitive to ambiguous messages conveyed by architecture and design today, long after the dictatorship ended and representative government returned. Works like *Inventory Control* (2011, fig. 2), *Cápsula I (Verde)* (2010), *Cápsula (Dulcora)* (2011), *Airconditioning Life Módulo* (2011) and *Módulo 1* (2011) address the intertwining of surveillance, consumption, and desire that increasingly characterizes materialism as a global force. This is in particular evidence in the Brazilian economy, in which today the cost of living, at least in the larger cities, is among the highest in the world (even as the conditions of poverty are among the most profound). These groupings of objects—made from polished materials such as mirrors, aluminum, and steel—suggest the type of high-end interior design that can be found in expensive boutiques in major cities around the world. Each bears a phrase that relates to some aspect of commercial culture, and each reflects back upon the viewer, becoming a symbol of the narcissism that drives the thirst for expensive status objects.

Perhaps the most provocative phrase is embossed on the surface of the twelve mirrors in Tavares's wall-mounted sculpture *Inventory Control*. In the film *Revolutionary Road*, Leonardo DiCaprio's character, Frank Wheeler, epitomizes the rising materialism of the 1950s: "Knowing what you've got, knowing what you need, knowing what you can live without—that's inventory control."³ There is good life advice in this phrase (if we replace "inventory control" for "self control," or even "happiness"), but as a series of curved mirrors like those used in stores to monitor shoppers, *Inventory Control* has negative connotations as well, as it also alludes to the surveillance occurring in many sites of commercial desire and acquisition. Our acceptance of this in the marketplace and online may lull us into a similar acceptance of governmental control of its "human inventory," as happened during Brazil's dictatorship and is again in the news in terms of our own current National Security Administration imbroglio.

Emphasizing the slipperiness of architectural language, Tavares's work erases gaps between the real and the virtual. The centerpiece of this exhibition is her immersive video, *Airshaft (to Piranesi)* (2008, cover), comprising maze-like views of interiors as seen from multiple perspectives in motion. The viewer is surrounded by a virtual space filled with architectural fragments that remain constantly morphing, sinking, and shifting, giving the viewer a sensation of being a bodiless consciousness floating in an endlessly unstable world. The work pays homage to the eighteenth-century artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi, whose views of the *carceri*, or prisons, show them to be spatial labyrinths; an apt metaphor for the vitality and disorientating qualities of cities like São Paulo.

Airshaft also inspires comparisons to the artist M. C. Escher, whose architectural views employ mathematics to convey impossible inversions in perspective, denials of gravity and other laws of space and time. While Escher's delightful images present mental conundrums, Tavares seeks to trigger a physical reaction, a sense of vertigo. She says:

Airshaft is about being immersed in a maze with no gravity, maybe underwater. The floating experience is a way of becoming suspended from real time; concrete references are taken away even though there are familiar structures such as pathways, stairs and platforms. *Airshaft* is a fictional landscape open to many different interpretations and experiences.⁴

The phenomenalist intensity of *Airshaft* is multi-sensoral, due to the addition of a collaborative sound piece created by Nashville composer Brian Siskind. *Niterói, water that hides* (2013) is named for the densely populated and impoverished city of Niterói near Rio de Janeiro, at the edge of which Niemeyer's stunning contemporary art museum looms over an azure bay. The sonic component, which Siskind describes as "a collage of mid-century/post-war orchestral vinyl recontextualized into a dark, deep and teeming sound environment," is a perfect embodiment of the rich discordance of urban experience, in Brazil and around the world.⁵



Fig. 2

In *Airshaft's* imaginary realm, utopian dreams of tomorrow combine with dystopic realities of today to form a confounding equation of tension, illusion, and possibility. As we feel increasingly afloat in the world, we note that the world itself is unmoored. It reflects us, and we reflect it.

Mark Scala, chief curator, Frist Center for the Visual Arts

Notes:

1. Ana Maria Tavares, e-mail to author, June 20, 2013.
2. From the artist's statement for *Deviations* (From the *Social hieroglyphs* series), 2011, translated by Beth Conklin, August 2012.
3. *Revolutionary Road*, DVD, directed by Sam Mendes (Glendale, CA: Dreamworks SKG, 2009).
4. Ana Maria Tavares, e-mail to author, June 20, 2013.
5. Brian Siskind, e-mail to author, June 21, 2013.

Artist's Biography

Ana Maria Tavares was born in 1958 in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. She earned her Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts in 1982 from the Armando Alvares Penteado Foundation in São Paulo; the M.F.A. from the Art Institute of Chicago (1986); and the Ph.D. in Art from the University of São Paulo (2000). In 2002, she received a fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation, NY.

Tavares is currently Professor of Art at the University of São Paulo. In 2005, she held the position of artist-lecturer at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam; and was the Ida Ely Rubin Artist-in-Residence at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2006–07.

Tavares's work has been included in major international biennials in São Paulo, Havana, Istanbul, and Singapore. A partial list of museums in which her work has been exhibited includes the Akademie der Kunst, Berlin; Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, Japan; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; The New Museum, New York; the Royal College of Art, London; the San Diego Museum of Art; the Shusev State Museum of Architecture, Moscow; the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan; and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco.

Illustrations:

Cover: *Airshaft (to Piranesi)* (video still), 2008. Three dimensional computer animation, 24 minutes, 04 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo.

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Figure 1: *Eclipse IX*, *Eclipse I*, and *Eclipse V* from the series *Hieróglifos Sociais*, 2011. UV printing on glass, mirror, and rubber, 13 3/4 x 31 1/2 x 1 in. each. Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo. © Ana Maria Tavares. Photo by Flavio Lamenha

Figure 2: *Inventory Control* (installation view), 2011. Adhesive vinyl and 12 rearview mirrors, 68 7/8 x 51 1/8 in. overall. Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Vermelho, São Paulo. © Ana Maria Tavares. Photo by Flavio Lamenha

Figure 3: *Pallazzo. Desviante Triple_Dia L* (detail) from the series *Hieróglifos Sociais*, 2011. Compound aluminum, colored and silver stainless steel, digital printing and electrostatic painting, 59 7/8 x 166 1/2 x 7 1/8 in. MAC USP Collection (Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil). © Ana Maria Tavares. Photo by Flavio Lamenha



Fig. 3