

PLACES WITHOUT A PAST

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For many artists, the meeting between art and architecture is fraught with the potential for misunderstandings, and worse. Typically, the contempt felt on the part of most contemporary architects towards the visual arts has resulted in a form of attenuated power struggle, with the balance of power invariably held by the designers of buildings, whose budgets are hundreds of times those of even the most ambitious and successful artists. The most obvious outcome of this struggle for power has been a succession of art museums built over the past ten years, nearly all of which display some palpable sense of hostility towards the works which they have designed to contain. Although these buildings are often the pride of their local communities, they are also typically the source of enormous frustration for artists and curators, who find themselves in a position of trying to situate artworks in spaces that have no affinity for them. Not surprisingly, many architects seem to believe that their spaces function better without art, or with art that has been selected (or even created) by them, a state of affairs that suggests that the failure of art and architecture to meet each other halfway will probably become worse before it gets better.

Faced with such a glaring imbalance of power, most artists find themselves unable to even contemplate the notion that art could function in such a way as to contest or refute the arrogance of contemporary museum architecture. Despite the advances in public art since the late 1980s, which suggest that the urban landscape can be effectively tamed by artists willing to forego the safety of the gallery space in favor of collective outdoor spaces, the general feeling regarding interior spaces designed for the display of art is that they should strive to be as visually neutral as possible. Failing that, most artists seem willing to allow their work to enter into a kind of visual dialogue with the space surrounding them, regardless of the degree to which that space is able to accommodate them. The notion that art can actually challenge the premises of architecture, and turn some of those assumption on their head, seems to be a possibility that still lies somewhere in an idealized future. Nevertheless, the work of some young artists, in particular that of Ana Maria Tavares, seems to be pointing the way in the right direction, by claiming even the most imposing of built structures as a kind of Duchampian found object.

My first exposure to Tavares' work occurred at the time of the 1998 Sao Paulo Biennale, when the project she had developed a year before for Niermeyer's Museum of Contemporary Art in Niterói was re-installed as "Relax'o'visions" at the Museu Brasileiro da Escultura. Intended as an installation that took the entire expansive interior as its point of departure, the work acted as a kind of modernist camouflage, disguising as much as possible the normally self-evident seams dividing an artwork from the architecture which contains it. In a sense, however, "Relax 'O Visions" could also be interpreted as subtle act of subversion, since it discreetly yet determinedly altered the perceived meaning of the Brutalist architecture in which it was installed, transforming it into a far more functional zone that it was ever intended to be. In particular, the deployment of handrails, turnstiles, white cushioned seating, reflecting mirrors, and shiny barriers fooled viewers into experiencing the space as a kind of way station or transit point, a place where one paused in one's journey before continuing on to somewhere else. On the other hand, this installation of Tavares' sculptures was both cleanly functional in its outward appearance, and determinedly optimistic in its embodiment of certain near-utopian modernist principles: shiny metallic surfaces, rounded edges, and streamlined engineering. Neither pure ornament nor literal critique, Tavares' installation took the form of an analysis of a space created by modernist aspirations, exaggerating certain aspects of the design so that they became almost confrontational in their transparency. While appearing to straightforwardly echo the

architect's concerns, Tavares' project can just as easily be seen as gently mocking them, since it introduces the specter of surveillance and/or crowd control into an environment characterized by its expansiveness and indifference to function.

Depending on the context in which Tavares' work is presented, the meaning of her installations can shift dramatically. At the 2000 Bienal of Pontevedra in Galicia, Spain, Tavares presented her sculptures in the entrance of a relatively new, fairly ill-conceived neo-modernist building, so that visitors experienced her art before they were even aware that they had entered the exhibition. This pre-empting of the architectural space, which lent an air of science fiction to what was otherwise a fairly mundane lobby, also greatly exaggerated the theatrical potential of the most public zone within the building. No sooner had viewers become oriented within the space than they were confronted with a mirror image of themselves, juxtaposed with the furniture-like details of Tavares' installation, which cast a half-inviting, half-repelling spell over the otherwise undistinguished space. This reclaiming of architecture as a space for social theater, which is very much in keeping with some of the fundamental precepts of the Brazilian Nova Objetividade movement of the 1960s, transforms these ideas into an experience which is tailor-made for a new century. Although in these constructions Tavares has eschewed the virtual in favor of the tangible, she effectively challenges our notions of the real by replacing a space that has been designated as pure and anti-relativistic into one that is charged by the lingering ghosts of a high-modern paradise that new architecture was promised to deliver.



Gambling. 1999



Mirrors and their reflection are at the heart of Tavares' investigation into perceptual illusion, but not in such a way that limits her to modernist buildings. For a 1998 exhibition at the Teatro Municipal de Sao Joao da Boa Vista, she installed a 60-square-meter mirror in the middle of the floor of the early 20th century wooden-beamed building, surrounded by her signature stainless steel barrier rails. The resulting reflection of the ceiling, which was visible from practically anywhere else in the building, succeeded in simultaneously drawing viewers' attention to the otherwise hidden structure of the place they were occupying, and in producing distorted perspectives of that architecture, so that a dizzying illusionistic clash between top and bottom accompanied spectators wherever they turned. A comparable installation at the Pavilhao das Cavalarias at Parque Lage in Rio de Janeiro pushed this idea to a further extreme. Rather than permitting the viewer to move around the space, as she had in Sao Joao, Tavares effectively obstructed all pedestrian flow through the building, and replaced the floor with a sunken, tilted mirror. While one's entrance into the space was physically impeded, a mere glimpse downward provided one with a deflected panorama upward, toward the intensely lit ceiling beams, which appeared almost threatening in their visual intensity, their brightness, and their bizarrely skewed angle.

Tavares' initial foray into video began with an exhibition in 2000 at the Centro Universitario Maria Antonia in Sao Paulo. Using her by now familiar vocabulary of poles, room dividers, handrails, and seats, Tavares divided the main gallery into a kind of waiting room for a video animation that brought together images of underground passageways, futuristic escalators, and outdoor labyrinths to suggest a world in which all the elements share a visual consistency. Moving seamlessly from one space to another, Tavares' camera, like the imagined spectator, never stops moving forward. As in her more exclusively architectural works, this looped animation appears to critique the contemporary built environment's obsession with order and control, at the same time as it underscores an elliptical beauty that is inherent to any built system that attempts to be entirely self-sufficient.



Estação I, Centro Cultural Maria Ântonia, 2000



Visiones Sedantes, 2000



For the Havana Biennial of 2000, Tavares created an installation entitled *Visiones Sedantes*, which in some sense represents a significant departure for her work. Acting as an institutional example of camouflage, the work began with a storefront façade covered in mirrored material, so that it presented passersby with a reflection of the historical Plaza de Armas. The title of the work was incorporated into this façade in large block letters, although there was no other indication that this was an artist's project, or anything other than a business or other commercial promotion – a strange enough phenomenon in downtown Havana! Upon entering, the spectator was confronted with a room that appears to have been set up for an afternoon recital: a geometric arrangement of chairs squares off with a piano in such a way as to suggest that the recital has either just ended or is about to begin: there is even a vase of fresh flowers set on the piano. Once the doors close, however, the illusion shifted noticeably, blending the muffled seeping of sounds from the busy street with a prerecorded audio track collaged together from an assortment of airports, concerts and parties. Although very little natural light entered from the brightly lit street, so that the room was enveloped with a somewhat other-worldly glow, one could still discern the movements of people walking by outside. On the one hand *Visiones Sedantes* offered the viewer nothing more complex or challenging than a space to sit down and rest, contemplate, and/or listen. For contemporary Havana, however, the piece also served as a glimpse of a world that is starkly unfamiliar within a revolutionary society: the melding together of corporate and cultural possibilities within a single space. As in her earlier works, Tavares has not set out to critique the situation in which she finds herself, so much as to suggest that within each collectively understood interpretation of a public space, there is always another possibility, often contradictory and sometimes filled with wonder, waiting to be explored. Sometimes, the only thing required to draw out this hidden reality is the simple act of treating all public spaces like empty sets, waiting to be filled with actors whose parts have not yet been written.