



Valeska Soares, *Untitled* (from *Vanishing Point*), 1998, beeswax, porcelain, aluminum, dimensions variable. All images courtesy of LiebmanMagnan, New York and Galería Camargo Vilaca, São Paulo.

For over a decade, Brazilian-born artist Valeska Soares has consistently transformed neutral environments into works of art, but unlike most installation art to date, Valeska's work focuses on what happens beyond the space and time of the exhibition itself. In a way, her installations work as life-size models, oddly-scaled metaphors for events that could have happened long before the exhibition ever takes place. In Valeska's installations, the spectator/participant seems to experience a split between real and representational time; you become aware of the immensity of your own daydream. Through a seemingly inexhaustible range of techniques, themes and strategies, Valeska's work oscillates between materiality and memory, desire and decay, sensation and intoxication. Although she keeps a studio in Brooklyn, most of her work involves traveling and exposure to the environments for which she will produce works. Her most recent projects include a monumental architectural intervention in the National Gallery of Canada and a large installation on both sides of the Mexican-American border for the San Diego Museum. This fall, Valeska and I met in her brownstone in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn to talk about borders and ways to transgress them artistically.

Vik Muniz Sometimes I start a project and along the way I realize that everything has to be changed. You seem to approach these situations more intelligently. You come to a project with very few preconceptions. Tell me, did you change the name of your project for the San Diego Museum?

Valeska Soares For inSITE2000? I changed the project; the original project was called *Something Borrowed*.

VM Tell me about it, how did it change?

VS InSITE2000 is a binational exhibition, coordinated by installation, a San Diego-based arts organization and Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, that commissions work for the Tijuana and San Diego region—and not necessarily for a museum site. The projects are situated all over the two towns. *Something Borrowed* was an idea for a possible landscape. I wanted to do a project that was almost impossible to achieve, to create a situation that would bring forth all the complexities of the region: cultural, political and social. I proposed cutting the border and turning it vertically to create two spaces. Of course, I couldn't get permission. The Border Patrol would not allow me to physically change the border. It's funny, the border itself is unassuming. It's made of secondhand metal pieces from the Gulf War and chicken wire. There is no sense that it could stop anybody who really wanted to from crossing it.

VM How did the project develop from there?

VS I decided I didn't want to go into that region and get myself involved in the politics; I'm not a political artist. So then my idea was to find a particular thing I might have in common with people on each side of the border centered around ideas about landscaping and gardening. There isn't much water in that region and every-thing in San Diego, like Las Vegas, is artificial. Things are created from nothing—everything is landscaped; it's an artificial paradise. But when you cross into Mexico, you see the region's original vegetation; it's a semidesert. I didn't know where I was going with this idea, but in any case, the final project went far from that.

VM What did you end up doing?

VS I started to think about how I could deal with this idea of the border, something that was solid but transparent. How I could deal with the illusion of entry...or of not entering. Because what you realize when you are there is that the border is psychological, the physical object of the fence itself doesn't stop anybody. The border exists in your mind. The Border Patrol has heat sensors and infrared scanners to detect people even in total darkness. They can scan inside Mexico, beyond the border. What stops people is the psychological, the idea that on the other side of the fence there are people who will hunt them down and catch them.

VM You mention that you are not a political artist, but you're an artist who has been dealing with the idea of borders in your work and in your life. You are a Brazilian living in the United States. Did that influence the way you went about doing this project?

VS It did. I'm interested in subjective borders, the limits that you impose on yourself and how illusionary they are. I've also been dealing with ideas of reflection and distortion, how you think things are and how you see them, and what gets distorted between those two perceptions. For instance, I don't know how I look or how I'm perceived. I have this imaginary "Valeska" in my mind. And each time I look at myself in the mirror, I can't recognize myself because what I see reflected is not exactly who I think I am. I thought perhaps there was a similar fluctuation of

perception in the Tijuana/San Diego area. People who live very close to one another think of themselves and one another in particular ways, but in reality, distort and reflect one another simultaneously.

VM Okay, what did you end up doing?

VS I'm trying to build an illusory field, using stainless steel sheets with a mirrored finish that are going to be placed on both sides of the border.

VM Along the fence?

VS Yes, because the fence is made of chicken wire, there is already a transparency involved. Depending upon where you are, you will think the fence is open and that you can walk through, to the other side. There is a contradiction in the material—the stainless steel will seem transparent, but is a very solid material. And, of course, what you are actually seeing is the same side that you are on, reflected from another space, that you cannot cross into.

VM Isn't that always the case? (*laughter*)

VS Yes! Anything you do there could rectify the idea of the border. So I thought I'd play the rectification to the limit by creating something more solid than what is already there. But at the same time, it's sort of a mirage.

VM It could look like a hole.

VS It could.

VM I've always thought that if you could walk to the end of the world, as they believed in medieval times, that there would be only mirrors: mirrors you could not pass through.

VS What's the name of that film? I love the scene where that guy gets to the end of the world.

VM Oh! Jim Carrey, *The Truman Show*!

VS My favorite scene is when he's sailing the boat and it gets stuck, as if it's at the end of the world. It's like the last boundary, the last horizon, and when you get there you realize that it's just an illusion.

VM Well, he had it easy—there was a door there. When your show opens this fall, how do you think people from each side of the border will perceive the project?

VS I don't know. There is another element to the project. I'm using text from Italo Calvino's book *Invisible Cities*, which talks about two cities that exist side by side and reflect each other. They keep looking at each other, but they don't love each other. I could never write or condense

anything as effectively about what I saw of the two cities as Calvino did. On the U.S. side, you will read the text in English; it will also be presented in Spanish, but the Spanish will be reversed as if in a mirror image—an unreadable text. On the other side you will have the Spanish in positive, and the English in reverse. I'm not sure how it's going to be perceived, but I think that's one of the challenges. You develop an idea but, if you're really sure of how the project is going to be perceived, there's no point in doing it. You have to allow yourself the possibility of failure, which would mean that all of the particulars of that situation could not be encompassed. If I allow myself that possibility, I learn things and can take a critical position toward what I do.



Valeska Soares, *Untitled* (from *Vanishing Point*), 1999, installation at Doble Vides, Museo Marítimo de Barcelona, two structures of iron and mirror, two antique crystal chandeliers, dimensions variable. Photo by J. Anrada.

VM You mentioned having researched the idea of gardens, of artificial landscapes and their creation in relation to nature. I've been following your art, and that's a constant in your work. You're transplanting realities in a project for Canada. Can you explain what you are doing there?

VS I'm working on an exhibition about Arcadia called *Elusive Paradise*. It will be in the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, a monumental museum with two courtyards, one is a garden and the other is a water courtyard. I've been trying to address two different levels of perception within the concept of garden and paradise, the semantic one and the mythological one. What I am proposing is one level of perception that is sensory: in the water court, I'm replacing the water with a perfume-scented liquid of a different color. It's going to contaminate the galleries with scent. And in the garden courtyard, I'm using a level of perception that's more conceptual and architectural. I'm creating a colonnade around the courtyard balcony, and floating on each column will be a ring of text, a title; it's a subjective bibliography. Each title makes reference to a garden, but they are not necessarily books that deal with gardens per se. They are political and fictional books, and if you read all of the titles, they will create another text that sends you back to the ideas and mythologies that we have surrounding gardens and landscapes.

VM *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili: The Strife of Love in a Dream*, by Francesco Colonna, an often neglected allegory from the high period of the Italian Renaissance is probably the most influential work in laying the groundwork for the execution of most gardens from the Renaissance on. There was this notion of walking through models of existence. First there is the labyrinth, the dense forest of darkness. Then there is the body of water, and the glass garden. Polyphilo goes through all of these experiences that were transferred or translated into elements of gardens—and his model was used from the Renaissance to Le Notre, even to the middle of the 19th century. And when Polyphilo finally finds what he's searching for, his muse Polia, which means wisdom...

VS ...She disappears.

VM Into thin air. And the only thing he is left with is a scent. You've been working with ideas centered around gardens and labyrinths for a while, as well as scents. Your career is a little bit like walking through a garden in that we experience a similar range of situations. You were first trained as an architect.

VS Yes.

VM And having gone through all of these ideas about the position of nature in relation to structures, your installation in the Sao Paulo Biennial was a different kind of garden. You made a bed of freshly cut roses. How did this whole thing begin?

VS I'm not quite sure. When I look back, it seems that there was always an interest in dealing with not necessarily gardens, but with ideal spaces, subjective spaces that referred back to how we construct ideas of paradise. It's been one of the biggest themes in our imagination since the beginning of time.

VM And it's a great contradiction, especially in modern times.

VS There is always a close correlation between what people try to do physically in constructing a landscape, and philosophy. When people wrote about gardens, there would be a correlation to philosophical quests. Garden paths related to the acquisition of wisdom, or dealt with experiences that might only exist subjectively. There has always been a desire to translate ideas into a physical space that related to nature, or rather, a controlled nature. I once saw this amazing sign on an L.A. freeway: “The landscape ends here.” (*laughter*) What does that mean? What is beyond the sign, if not landscape?

VM It's landscape as a construct.

VS Exactly, everything beyond was not a landscape, it was...

VM ...Haphazard.

VS People take for granted the fact that Central Park and Prospect Park were designed. Most spaces that we experience as “natural” have been constructed as sculptures on a larger scale. They deal with mass and volume, perspective and points of view, and how the subject plays itself into the landscape.

VM That also has to do with the cultural environment. English gardens are supposed to look natural, where things just happen to grow beautifully, while French gardens are architecturally designed to emphasize the hand of man over nature.

VS They want to emphasize the control man has over nature, but then you see how these ideas of paradise shift like paradigms.



Valeska Soares, *Untitled* (from *Fall*), 1994, installation at Galería Camargo Vilaca, São Paulo, cast beeswax and red roses, dimensions vary. Photo by Daniel Ortega.

VM How do you position your work in these terms? Do you want your work explored as different situations? Or do you want to emphasize one view or another?

VS I'm fascinated with vanishing points. Not only architectural vanishing points, how you view things, but also the idea of how you vanish on that point—how, at the same moment you place yourself there, you have to disappear. So I take these concepts to a subjective and abstract level that examines or investigates how we perceive things. You deal with perception in your work, the very close shift between what is there and what is not there, and what you perceive as being there. I think my work has to do with that same concept, but on a more subjective level.

VM *Vanishing Point* is the title of another one of your works; but in this case, what we have is a 17th century type of labyrinth constructed from stainless steel tanks that were filled with perfume. Although the work had a very present physicality, in my own way of perceiving things, I thought that it had a lot to do with illusion. The night of the opening, bees that were seduced by the scent of the perfume fell into the tanks. It made me think of Zeuxis, who painted grapes so beautifully that they attracted birds.

VS I am really interested in that faint line between being seduced by something and being completely intoxicated by it. In my work, perfume has become a metaphor for possibilities of intoxication. It's a substance that crosses that border between being pleasurable and being overintoxicating.

VM In other words you're asking the question, What if lethal gas smelled good?

VS What is desire if it's not this faint line between being intoxicated by something or sickened? You can be intoxicated by many things: hate, desire, love. Our societies have become so normalized that one of the only transgressive points we have is this very faint line of intoxication.

VM When one thing becomes another.

VS Yes, when you cross the line, even if it's only for a minute or so, you abandon yourself to something. You've lost control.

VM I love your piece with the hummingbird feeders. What do you call that?

VS Oh, *Strangelove*. It's inspired not only by hummingbird feeders, but by IV bags and medical tubing. The color of the liquid is red, because that is the color that attracts hummingbirds. But the liquid in the piece contains poisoned wine, and on the outside are lead flowers. The piece functions like a minefield—it's placed inside where the birds can never get to it, but human beings can. The feeders are sealed, but if anyone were to actually complete the action and ingest the fluid, he or she would die.

VM There's the paradox of Zeuxis and his contender, Parrhasius. Zeuxis painted fruit that could attract birds. When Zeuxis went to see what Parrhasius was doing, he stood in front of Parrhasius's painting and said, "Okay, unveil it." And Parrhasius said, "It is already unveiled; it is a painting of a veil." The question being, which image is the strongest, the one that fools a man

or the one that fools a bird? I believe Parrhasius wasn't as good because for man, art is a primal experience. We're always trying to retrieve our primitive, more animal-like senses. We're trying to go to the limit. That's my view, that we're always trying to retrieve a bit of this trance and sensation and sensibility that we had before.

VS I'm thinking of a text where the author talks about the development of human beings. He said that in the beginning there was only imagination. We understood the world through images. But then imagination became so dense that we had to conceptualize because we couldn't deal with such a huge amount of images. That's how language was created. We have come to a point where language and concepts are so dense that we are moving back to the imagination, but it's not the original imagination anymore.

VM It's an image of an image.

VS It's contaminated, intoxicated by the conceptualization of the two processes. We can't isolate ourselves and go back to this primitive place where we only understand through images or mythological icons. It's nonsense to try to separate mind from body.

VM Or from phenomenon. But I think it's precisely within this impossibility that the desire to feel these things again resides. This fuels a lot of artistic experience. Everything that exists, I believe, exists as an image first. The Polynesians' first man is named Tiki, which in Tahitian means image. Even the thing that would give names to other things, to see things for the first time around, was an image in and of itself.

VS But you cannot think that this image came to be divested of its subjectivity. I mean, there's no way to look at something and not invest it with subjectivity.



Valeska Soares, *Untitled* (from *Strangelove*), 1996, installation at Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis, Missouri, interior view, cast lead, blown glass vessels, wine and poison, dimensions variable.

VM Maybe that's the paradox for those of us who are influenced by art from the 1960s, as I think you and I both are. We're dealing with minimalism, it's something that's present in our work. A lot of artists are dealing with the concept of "the thing itself"—how to create objects that represent nothing but themselves. And here we are borrowing from the aesthetic of those objects and impregnating them with different ideas. I'm more interested in photographs of minimalist sculptures than the sculptures themselves. I see a lot of minimalist influence in your work. How do you see that?

VS I went to architecture school; I never went to art school. We were immersed in modernism—that pure, ethical utopia, and things that were not related to life per se. As an architect, there was such a desire to control everything. When you designed a house you also wanted to design peoples' furniture, their way of living, their way of acting inside the space, their clothes...so everything would get along. (*laughter*) When I started doing art, it was all phenomenology. I mean, in Brazil that was the biggest thing.

VM Merleau-Ponty was selling out stadiums there for a while.

VS Art for art's sake. At some point, all of those things became so strange. My desire was always to contaminate, because it got to the point where you could not represent anything.

VM I want to talk about the work that you first showed in California. I see that as a step apart from most of the work that you've been doing since the installation of roses in the Biennial. You had something then that referred to the idea of a garden, the piece with the pots. I see that as dealing with memory and residual impressions, an idea of Arcadia. What was the name of that work?

VS It's called *Untitled* (from *Vanishing Point*). I had done the steel maze of tanks which referenced Renaissance and Italian gardens as well as English architectural follies. 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. A folly has no sense to it beyond the pure desire underlying its construction. That was also the point of the metal maze. At the time, I wanted to address those issues in a private way. How could I deal with a model for a landscape or an Arcadia that was closer to me, as if I were to look back into my own garden knowing that I had to leave it? How could I preserve it in my memory, or recreate it in another circumstance, create an index of that thing that was not there?

VM So how do you see the translation of one material into another as having been an active part of this process?

VS Well, that also had to do with the folly. It was about my own desire and things that I really couldn't control. I wanted to see those things exist in another form because I couldn't have them in the original form anymore. I wanted to carry them with me. That's the way I deal with psychological things sometimes; I deal with them in a sculptural form. I preserve them, like

mortuary masks. That's how I came up with this idea to cast each pot, destroy the original, and keep the replica in another material. I went about it very systematically, although there was no system per se; it was one that I was creating out of my own desire. I classified the pots. I mapped them out and gave each original material a surrogate in the sculptural world.

VM There are offshoots in the evolution of your work, like the eyedroppers, which seem to exist by themselves in a certain way—or am I mistaken?

VS No, there is a correlation to language in the way I work. I don't have a lot of story lines but some of the objects that I create I see as words that can be repeated in different forms or that can be articulated in a phrase. The eyedroppers, for instance, dealt with issues in the work that had become "words." They're not necessarily attached to a phrase or a paragraph; they're isolated ideas that came from the *Vanishing Point* series. I was trying to think of how one delivers things into the world, and receives things, and I arrived at the idea of dosage.

VM And vision.

VS And vision, illusions, expectations and conditionals. They are oversized variations of the droppers one finds in medicine bottles, but mutated into formal variations. What fascinates me are the unknowns. I thought the eyedroppers were going to drop the liquid, one drop at a time, but it turned out to be much better than that—they defy your expectations. They can go for half an hour without doing anything, and then you turn your back and they deliver. (*laughter*)



Valeska Soares, *Untitled* (from *Strangelove*), 1996, installation at Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis, Missouri, exterior view of fountain element, cast aluminum, enamel, pump, and perfume, 24 x 36 inches.

VM I see one work of yours that seems anomalous to what we've been talking about, *Sinners*, which you did for Site Santa Fe. How does that fit into your production?

VS All along, my work process has been about systems that work outside of reason. I realize the semantic paradox of that, but what I mean is that I've always been interested in how madness and faith operate, because they have their own systems of reasoning. That's how *Sinners* came about; I was thinking of sin's nature, how it is seen or how it exists—because sinning is sort of an intoxication in and of itself. It means there is a border you have to cross.

VM Or that was crossed.

VS Yes, but not necessarily into something bad. I think of sinning as a creative act.

VM Overcreative, maybe.

VS It's one of the artifices—you can cross a line, you can transgress, you can challenge assumed notions.

VM When desire transgresses the structures in which...

VS But desire always transgresses structures; that's what desire is about. People think that it's possible to control desire, as if it's a lab and you can control where your desire goes and when your desire stops. You don't have a controlled desire. We would like to think so, but that's consumption.

VM They try to sell you that idea, that you can buy it and keep it in a bottle.

VS The reality is that you can't. And that's the struggle. We keep creating systems of what we should and should not do: how we should and should not walk, how we should cross a path. What interests me is the jump that can be made between what is allowed and what is not allowed, and how creative that can be.

VM It makes me think of your series, *Cheap Emotions*, in which you had vials filled with different kinds of perfume.

VS I live in Brooklyn where all these shops sell counterfeit perfumes. And the semantics, the names given to these scents...

VM What kind of names?

VS Beautiful. Escape. Poison. Passion. Now you have Schizophrenia. There is a whole pathology of desire invested in naming perfume and this pathology is compounded and made even more perverse by the fact that these are not the original scents. They're the fake ones you buy if you can't afford the real ones; they're the cheap ones. So I wanted to do something that would deal with this desire and this pathology. I created flasks that contain cheap scents locked inside. In order to fulfill the nature of the work you would have to break the flask, which of course nobody does. There's always something latent in there that rectifies the pathology of desire. Like when you have a bottle of champagne or a tin of caviar that you keep forever, waiting for the perfect moment or that special person that never comes along.

VM I've always wondered how someone names a perfume; did you use given names or make them up?

VS In *Cheap Emotions* I used names that were given. *Strangelove*, the piece consisting of lead flowers and glass vessels with poisoned wine inside, had perfumes that were developed and named in a completely different way. I was commissioned to do *Strangelove* for a sculpture park. At first, I didn't know how to go about it—it's a park with a monumental approach to sculpture, and I didn't want to deal with any of that. I decided to make the smallest sculpture I could do, something that would not necessarily be perceived as a sculpture, but as garden

furniture. So in addition to the glass vessels, I created a fountain that sprays perfume in the air—it's a permanent exhibition. A chemist develops the scents for me. I just call him and tell him more or less what I want.

VM What kind of references do you give him?

VS I give him abstract references: I don't want it to be flowery, or too feminine; I want it to have a residual note, to be strong, and not very sophisticated; I want it to have this cheap note to it. It's very abstract and very subjective. He creates samples, I choose one and then we give it a name.

VM The scent of perfume is associated with a human presence—a body smells of perfume. There is a disembodiment of that in your work; you construct a *place* that smells like perfume.

VS That goes back to the vanishing point—it refers to the same disembodiment, to something that has a physicality, but one that you can't grasp.

VM One imagines a human presence. How do you see people in relation to your installations?

VS They play a very big part; my pieces could not work without people.

VM A tree in the forest.

VS I'm not interested in some kind of monolithic narrative. That's why I'm fascinated by scents and other ephemeral things; I'm giving people triggers that activate memories and contexts, and they create their own narratives. So each piece has multiple readings depending upon who is seeing it, or the context in which they are seeing it. There is no fixed meaning. What I want my pieces to be are triggers.