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In his 1972 work *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino coined an enigmatic expression: "Desires are already memories."¹ Despite its assured cadence, the sentence contains an obvious contradiction: a yearning for something that hasn't happened yet can't possibly be the same as an untrustworthy picture of what already occurred. The phrase suits its subject in that it refuses to succumb to sense. Both memories and desires hold a similar kind of paradox within them—they feel true at their core, but pieces of them are always just out of reach. Valeska Soares's work exists comfortably in this uneasy space. It asserts itself between memory and text, the visceral and the ethereal, the hope for a revelatory experience and the words one might use to summarize it after the fact.

Soares harnesses the power of text to be both deliberate and slippery, employing the capacity of language to convey multiple messages at once. The title of her mixed-media work *Any Moment Now...* (2014), for instance, can be deployed as an earnest statement of rapt anticipation or as an acerbic signal of impatience. The unstable meanings suggested by the name are only the beginning. The piece is an infinitely rearrangeable poem composed of found material: vintage dust jackets mounted on canvases hung on a wall. The publications are related through proximity and subject matter: *Early Dark*, *Tender Is the Night*, *I'll Cry Tomorrow*. Some are wistful—*Drink to Yesterday*—others unflinching—*The Party's Over*. Together, they reveal a societal obsession. If time is the titular subject of so many fictions, dramas, and nonfictions—*The Age of Reason*, *A Thousand Years and a Day*, *Their Finest Hour*—it must be a shared source of fascination and anxiety, a primary means by which we organize experience. Soares does not shy from subjects as vast as this, instead plumbing the depths of such topics as time, togetherness, solitude, desire, and pleasure. Though her mediums vary from steel to ceramic and from paper to wax, her explorations are consistent in their unflinching capacity to dig until they reach marrow, where physical substance and symbolic significance are one and the same.

Meanings are built into materials in the same volatile way they are embedded in words; despite the fact that some seem intrinsic, they rely on context. This is why materials mean radically different things inside and outside the white cube, and why words lose their sense when repeated over and over, back to back; without other words around them they dissolve into sounds. In *Catálogo* (2008), Soares explores the materiality of text in a literal fashion, turning recycled book pages into pulp and recasting the viscid substance into 44,600 individual letters, piled high. With their printed type expunged, the myriad meanings these works once presented are reduced to twenty-six basic shapes. The volume of material is the same as it was before it was eviscerated. But unlike a heap of books, which might signify the vast amount of knowledge it contains, this jumbled mountain is full of potential energy, a mess of positive and negative spaces waiting to be arranged into something new. By creating a new work through the destruction of others, Soares suggests that the meanings that were there were no more knowable, and perhaps no more significant, than as-yet-unwritten ones.

Soares is unafraid of ephemerality. Much of her work is rooted in the conviction that transformation demands destruction, and that translation always involves loss. Both materials and words are hopelessly imprecise when it comes to conveying indistinct sensations in hindsight. Memories are by nature foggier than experiences themselves; they decay like so much organic matter. Though it's impossible to recall and communicate every perceptual impression, trying remains a primary exercise of human experience. It's a means of making sense of both daily and profound occurrences, of finding out whether someone else saw what you saw. Despite the risk of misinterpretation, this error-prone activity is worth the effort. To know all the meanings of another person up front would be wholly uninteresting.

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With the understanding that desire hinges on a degree of mystery, Soares experiments with the allure of the unstated. In *Love Stories* (2007), classic writings on love are stripped of all their content apart from the titles, headers, and page numbers. The blank books are arranged on a shelf where visitors can thumb through them. The reproductions allude to the canonical quality of the originals; even deprived of its body, Gabriel García Márquez's *Del amor y otros demonios* could stir an association. They also point to the way subjective memory, whether of a plot point or a person, tends to stand in for the real thing. Faced with the unknowability of other people, Soares suggests, we paste ourselves into the blanks. *For To (V)* (2007) similarly investigates gaps in understanding, this time probing the intimate relationships between others. Dedicatory pages torn from books are arrayed on the wall edge to edge. Together they form an asymmetrical bracket that swoops down from the ceiling, ending at a single sheet inches from the floor. The dedications on these pages are obscured in more than one sense: the authors are often unnamed, and in thanking their loved ones they refer to circumstances readers cannot possibly deduce. The objects of their gratitude and commitment are even more enigmatic, identified by first names, nicknames, and pet names. The inaccessibility of additional information goads a vain desire to crack the mystery. In another work, *Edit (Love Stories)* (2012), Soares uses excerpts from critical theory as unlikely source material. She modifies single pages from Susan Rubin Suleiman's *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* and Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*, blocking the more academic language with sharp-edged black boxes as if redacting it on behalf of a government agency. The glossy C-prints are all the more engaging because the obstructions are built into the images and impossible to take back.

Many of Soares's most poignant works revel in the imaginative potential of what's not there. Leftovers and ancillary objects convey a sense of the absent thing more brilliantly than a picture of it ever could. In *Sugar Blues (V)* (2013), used candy wrappers are arranged into minimal compositions. The carefully placed pieces of tiny, vibrant, metallic trash, some bearing gooey marks where the chocolate once was, are encased in shadow boxes. Each is a small city that one can inhabit; the arrangements are inviting despite the fact that the party is visibly over. In *Untitled (from Vanishing Point)* (1998), wax and ceramic replicas stand in for a collection of more than a hundred clay and white and black plastic flower pots Soares could not bring with her when she moved from her Brooklyn apartment. In describing her motivations, she said, "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 preserve them, like mortuary masks."² The substitutes are doubles, monuments to the unmonumental original things, which Soares subsequently destroyed. The sources for the castings were of negligible objective value and were significant only to the artist, but the effort involved in duplicating each one causes the copies to resonate. Soares does not conserve the thing itself as a precious object but rather protects her memory of it.

In the sense that the copies will never perfectly capture the original, *Untitled (from Vanishing Point)* could be read as an exercise in futility. It can also be seen as an allegory for the creative process, typically marked by failure, repetition, and dizzied feelings of forestallment. Soares manifests representations of circularity in symbolic and visceral ways. In *Spiraling* (2014), eight antique spiral staircases are gathered at the center of the room, each only four or five steps tall. They are coupled: one twists up and to the left, the next down and to the right. Angling upward only to stop, they form an island of thwarted aspirations. The work conveys inevitability—what goes up must come down—but though the steps lead frustratingly nowhere, the tone is playful. Rather than a mournful musing on fate, the physicality of the loops makes them feel almost comic, like a slapstick pratfall repeated for laughs. In defiance of the weighty subject matter she tackles, understated humor winds its way into many of Soares's works, an unexpected reward for engaging with it.

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Born 1957 in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, Soares was educated as an architect and was always particularly interested in the poetic possibilities of architecture as well as the ways environments can affect human behavior. For *Push Pull*, a 2013 performance at the Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation (CIFO) during Art Basel Miami Beach, giant hunks of pastel-colored, edible, flavored taffy hung from stainless steel armatures. The candy's viscous texture gives into gravity but also resists, and visitors were invited to step up to manipulate and eat it. The work could be a meditation on impermanence, on the power of human intervention to effect change on matter, or on the oft-repeated aphorism that everyone is an artist, but more to the point, it's about the simultaneous seriousness and silliness of it all, the corporeal feeling of holding up a giant chunk of taffy in a public plaza. Soares's *Vaga Lume*, installed at Eleven Rivington gallery in New York's Lower East Side in 2010, also invites visitors to toy with it. Long chains dangle from hundreds of bare lightbulbs, and visitors can pull the cords to turn individual lights on and off. Aesthetically, the piece is reminiscent of Jeff Wall's iconic *After "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue* (2000), a light box photograph that depicts Ellison's protagonist hunched under a ceiling saturated with lightbulbs. It also recalls Felix Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled* (Golden) (1995), a gilded, plastic, beaded curtain that visitors are invited to pass through. Beyond exploring themes of temporality, embodiment, and visibility, both *Push Pull* and *Vaga Lume* are deeply rooted in context. At an art fair known for its superficial commerciality, Soares offers up the sweetest, stickiest candy and invites people to mess with it. In New York's lighting district, where every other storefront is chock-full of lamps and chandeliers, she presents the one thing in no short supply but offers a quality of interaction otherwise inaccessible. Her experimental scenarios commit equally to cerebral and sensuous experience; even her most theoretical investigations are also physical invitations.

In *Untitled (Vanishing Point)* (1998), steel vessels are filled with perfume, suffusing the gallery with a pungent, sweet, heavy odor. The fifteen tubs are arranged like flower beds in a Renaissance garden, but unlike those ornate displays, these forms are minimal; the shapes have been pared back to sharp edges articulated in cold metal. As visitors walk through the room, it's not the visual but the olfactory quality of the work that becomes immersive—and intrusive. Too much of something sweet becomes overpowering, almost unbearable. Soares notes, "I am really interested in that faint line between being seduced by something and being completely intoxicated by it."³ This work is an exercise in crossing that barrier, from flirtatious exhilaration to woozy inebriation. By contrast, two sculptures, *Untitled (Pillow II)* and *Untitled (Mattress I)* (2007), give shape to the critical tension between not enough and too much. The sculptures of two pillows and a mattress bear the evidence of bodies—indentations mark the spots where two heads rested on plush down—but these signals of warmth are specious. The icons of softness and comfort are carved in marble, a medium prized for its hardness and solidity. By pitching content against material, Soares conveys invitation and prohibition simultaneously.

True to life, togetherness in Soares's work is full of the gaps that make love and conversation interesting (the same ones that also render it always incomplete). Her works on being together are also works on solitude. *Conversation Piece* (2010) is composed of two glass chairs that share an arm but face in opposite directions. There are no seats where the cushions are meant to go; one can imagine the interaction that might happen if two people sat there, but actually doing so would break the sculpture and cause both participants to collapse in shattered glass. The fragility of the chairs points to the unsteadiness of any social bond, even one hopefully conceived. Rather than issuing a cheerful invitation to participate, the work's address is closer to a bait-and-switch. It looks like other works that strive for conviviality but in fact conveys the imperfect nature of any connection, even one that seems shiny on the surface.

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But imperfection, Soares suggests, is not to be mourned. On the contrary, the incomplete nature of most interactions causes even partial bonds to reverberate with possibility. In *Finale* (2013), an antique table topped with a mirror is glugged with gold-rimmed goblets, etched cups, and ornately painted pitchers. They are filled with various kinds of liquor such as tequila, wine, champagne, and others for gallery goers to drink at will. The glasses are occasionally replenished but otherwise left untouched, free from intervention apart from the occasional sip or swig. The work's title suggests celebration, but the nature of the party is a mystery. As in so many of her works, Soares sets all the pieces in place, creating narrative opportunities and taking care not to foreclose them. She happily deprives us of the ending, suggesting only that the same uncertainty that keeps people apart can bring them together. Just as there is no way for visitors to know what joyful event is being capped off with a toast, there is no way for them to know their absent drinking companions. The incomplete scenario is a challenge: to invent memories in place of lacunae, or to hang out in the blank spaces, acknowledging that there's more to be gained by leaving things unsettled.

- 1 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1972), p. 8.
- 2 Valeska Soares by Vik Muniz, interview, *BOMB*, no. 74 (Winter 2001), <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2353/valeska-soares>.
- 3 Ibid.

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