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Publication SOARES, Valeska. *Follies / Capricho*. New York: The Bronx Museum of the Arts; Monterrey: Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey; Ontario: Art Gallery of Hamilton, 2006.

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VIK MUNIZ

Vanishing Points

Je suis l'espace où je suis.
—NOEL ARNAUD, *L'état d' ébauche*

Et voici que je suis devenu un dessin d'ornament
Volutes sentimentales
Enroulement de spirales
Surface organisée en noir et blanc
Et pourtant je viens de m'entendre respirer
Est-ce bien dessin
Est-ce bien moi.
—PIERRE ALBERT-BIROT, *Poèmes à l'autre moi*

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THE DREAM OF WISDOM

In the medieval epic *The Dream of Poliphilus* by Francesco Colonna, the protagonist wanders "a sensuous oneiric path" in search of his beloved muse Polia (wisdom). The design of Poliphilus's path is a metaphor for life itself: he encounters confusion, order, illusion, fear, determination, and, finally, wisdom. Poliphilus searches for Polia by letting himself go, by experiencing the ever-changing environments as if moved by a primeval force. He behaves as an indistinguishable part of his own dream, much the way most people move through life.

It is no wonder that Colonna's classic became the conceptual blueprint behind all gardens from the Renaissance to the end of the eighteenth century. From Pirro Ligorio to André Le Nôtre, garden designers have made reference to *The Dream of Poliphilus* and its narrative structure. Colonna (himself an architect who later became a Dominican monk), aimed to create an interactive environment between the material world of the senses and the intellectual constructs of virtue and common good. In his design, the path to wisdom involved a plethora of sensations, and truth emanated from the experience of pleasure.

Inspired by *The Dream of Poliphilus*, the labyrinthine garden dictates the visitor's experience. Only by experiencing the garden as a whole can any goal be reached. Yet the garden's geometry also exemplifies the artificiality of goals and ambitions. Man does not redesign nature, he designs *in* nature, creating the imprint of his existential quest for meaning. The garden is a gigantic inside-out toy, in which we experiment with life through play.

SEARCHING FOR DISAPPEARANCE

As I write these words, I am sitting under a cherry tree inside the Brooklyn Botanical Garden. It is a hot summer day, and I notice the scent of wilted roses. I hear birdsong, and children playing. I feel like part of the tree against which I lean. From here, I can observe the complete lack of purpose and direction with which visitors promenade along the pathways, stopping sporadically to smell a flower or to touch the rugged bark of a tree. Their faces reflect both honest and feigned displays of curiosity and amusement. It is as if they are looking for something they've lost, but they don't want

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anyone to know for fear the others will find it before they do. The wandering visitors' search is so directionless and indiscriminate that it's almost as if they are searching for something to search for, a common ethos of our overdesigned culture. I sense the frustration of some and the pleasure of other garden visitors. They seem to desire their place in the landscape.

Amid the abundance of the mineral and vegetal world, the garden visitor is reassured by the labels attached to plant specimens. Paradise, or the place where nothing has yet been named, is hell to us civilized sinners. The human figure in the landscape—like that found in the paintings of Church, Claude, Friedrich, and Poussin—is a projection into the unnameable. It functions like a space-agency probe sent in search of life on distant planets where nothing exists. The garden was designed as a place for mediation between the physical and the mental worlds, where man can experience his ancestral ties to nature without renouncing civilization.

> It is vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such. It is the bog in our brain and bowels, the primitive vigour of nature in us, that inspires that dream.
>
> —HENRY DAVID THOREAU

THE VANISHING GARDEN

Valeska Soares maintained her garden zealously, fastidiously. On her modest U-shaped path of mossy bricks, one could promenade through rows of gigantic daisies, delight in an infinite spectrum of colorful zinnias, and sample the odor of the aromatic herbs in pots of different sizes and shapes. Unstoppable vines with purple flowers covered everything. We always invited ourselves for dinner there. After the meal, we could observe fireflies hovering, confused by the abundance of plants from which to sample. Valeska worked on her garden for six years, but then she had to move. The prospect of life without a garden made her think about gardens more intensively. Prior to her move, she made a detailed inventory of all her plants. She mapped their exact locations and made casts of all her pots, in-

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cluding the broken ones, so she could recreate the entire place, or at least a good effigy of it, at a later time.

The effect of such work is similar to the feeling of remembering an occasion when we were thinking about the past. This is a mnemonic double negative, the sort of complexity that both weaves together and unravels the fabric of history. By isolating the mental pictures of the copied garden from its original, organic counterpart, Valeska was negotiating between remembered and actual dimensions.

Beginning in the 1960s, such artists as Robert Morris and Bruce Nauman created environments that dealt with the intellectual and perceptual experience of space. Their corridors and labyrinths owed much of their simple iconography to ancient garden designs. Valeska's work, however, extends the investigations of these installation artists to focus on a more personal, sensual articulation of space. Valeska's installations make one aware of the similarities between a particular environment and remembered places, either real or imaginary. She has both advanced the practice of installation art and worked towards a better definition of it.

VANISHING POINT

The smell of wilted roses wafts again in my direction. An image of Valeska's installation *Untitled (from Fall)* (1994) comes to mind. It is another transplanted garden, a bed of freshly cut red roses covering the floor of a room, a labyrinth of blossoms and thorns. The rose scent grows stronger by the day, as if the flowers are desperately trying to make up for the decay in their color and form. Smell is their last appeal to posterity. The viewer is invited to experience the conventional beauty of the flowers presented as a form of discarded goods. The piece starts when the flowers begin to die.

In *Vanishing Point* (1998), Valeska substituted the roses themselves with a maze of metal troughs filled with perfumed water that permeates the room. The harmonious, symmetric structure exists as a reminder of the control of nature. Yet the metal maze inspires a mild form of dread, a sense

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that it is concealing something, and obstructing our movement. While the flower piece alluded to the decay of beauty, *Vanishing Point* refers to changes in the style and in the architecture of the very structures in which desire takes place. The geometric forms transform nature into a logo for the Arcadian dream. The flower piece made reference to decay, *Vanishing Point* to the history of decay.

In contrast to the installation's ominous geometry, the scent suggests something as formless, invisible, and intoxicating as desire itself. Valeska knows too well the temporality of her installations. The visitor will leave the room, the exhibition will close and will live only in the form of a memory. But the visitor will return to the piece every time he experiences a similar scent. And every time he returns, he will be reminded that the place in his dreams, that ancient garden of his protean existence, is but a memory inside a memory.

In *The Dream of Poliphilus*, our protagonist travels through life until he finally encounters his muse. But just when he and his love unite in a passionate kiss, Polia dissolves into thin air, leaving only the scent of musk and amber. At this moment, Poliphilus finally wakes from his dream, but can still smell his beloved.

This essay was originally published in *Valeska Soares: Ponto de fuga /desaparecimento [Vanishing Point]* (São Paulo: Galeria Camargo Vilaça, 1999).