

De Natura

Leonor Nazaré

From the 110th floor of the World Trade Center, look at Manhattan", Michel de Certeau proposes in the beginning of the chapter "Caminhos pela cidade"¹ ["Walks Through The City"], a book in which he approaches the structure of urban movements from an anthropological point of view. Catarina Leitão happened to be in Paris the day this became no longer possible. She was travelling at the time; away from the city where she lives. Nowadays, traveling is a more or less organized formula of motion across the planet; it corresponds, in the so-called civilized world, to a predictable transiting through various non-places², as well as pilgrimages to places whose value has been transformed by tourist advertisements, historical clichés and, in some instances, by some whimsical enjoyment of nature. The city dweller dreams of escaping: to leave his city for other cities or for the country, the mountains or the beach; in short, looking for other landscapes.

But, as Georges Perec says, with a measure of mordacity and pessimism regarding the country reveries of the city dweller, for most people he knows "the country is a pleasant place complete with a second home by the side of the highways they take up on Friday nights. When they go there, they courageously walk a few feet before returning to the city on Sunday after lunch, where, for the rest of the week, they will acclaim the virtues of a returning to nature".³

Landscape, as a concept, is a cultural construction whose outlook is made up of the arts that influence it, such as literature, painting, film and the mass media, as Alain Roger tried to demonstrate in his *Court Traité du Paysage*.⁴ In the description of this process and of the history of the civilizations who did (not) know the word, the pictorial or literary representation of, or the intentional creation of, for instance, gardens, three things become clear: first, the importance in the West of two great moments, the Renaissance and its geometrical gardens and the 18th Century with the discovery of new mountain, sea and desert landscapes, culminating in the celebrated sense of the "sublime". Second, the notion that the idea of landscape usually eludes those who, like the peasants, live closer to those idyllic landscapes that fill the dreams of city dwellers. The beauty of a landscape is evaluated by city dwellers through an aesthetic device; country people use a utilitarian device (a beautiful cornfield is the one that yields a fine crop). By extension, ecological notions of the environment must also be dissociated from the concept of landscape. Third: with the appearance of perspective in painting, the landscape in the background inscribes itself in a new space and the secularization of its approach frees it from religious symbolism. Painting incorporates landscape and gives it back as an open window to the outside world and through painted mirrors and windows it propagates the overlapping of exterior and interior spaces, further intermingling the relationship between reality and art.

Finally, it becomes clear how efficient an art-informed gaze can be in forming our perception of natural spaces and, furthermore, in constructing and appropriating it.

Having reached this point, we are probably ready to pause before thinking about a natural nature in opposition to a tamed nature. Notwithstanding, we will have to oppose them again... so as to survive the death of the myth, the loss of the Eden where a tree of life and a tree of knowledge seemingly confused us, taking from us the right to a naïve gaze. It is the gaze that is at stake when the nature to be evaluated is a space untouched by Man. On the one hand, the gaze is defined by the point of view and ways of reaching the place, and on the other, by the images and fantasies the gazer projects upon it.

In this exhibition, Catarina Leitão confines the landscape issue to the more specific circumstance of the recreation of artificial forms of nature within the city, while including the evoked broad representations of the landscape concept and the central issue of the gaze: "In the contemporary garden the "visual" aspect is emphasized.

City gardens (...) follow modes of landscape painting. These gardens are planned to generate points of view (...) from a distance. "The public is not allowed to touch or step on anything, any kind of physical interaction is repressed" (Catarina Leitão, in this catalogue). It is worth thinking this work from the standpoint of that interdiction of physical involvement.

In a 2001 exhibition at the Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Sintra 5, Catarina Leitão presented several tents. The visitor was invited to them and lie down, hearing, seeing, smelling each proposed escape environment ("Bed tent", "Lazydress tent", "Forest tent", "Camouflage Tent" "Desert tent", etc.). The same model does not apply in the current show. None of these artificial places can be inhabited, except by the gaze.

Among the first tents and drawings there were two explicit "Bed tents". The bed appears again in this exhibition: a piece almost devoid of volume, its only relevant thickness being a small pillow. This invitation for a bed or camouflaged sleeping bag, to be seen from above, allows us to imagine sleeping with the sky for a ceiling instead of a tent. It also has the particularity of evoking camouflage in a context of vulnerability. Nearby, a cutout of sky hangs above a piece of forest ("Landscape"), indicating this ambiguous protective function. Does the sky protect?

Camouflage fabric hides the soldier in wartime, making him resemble nature. Seen from above, the soldier would blend in - chameleon-like - with the forest. In this exhibition the cloth is used to evoke the very notion of imitating nature, inserting it in all commentaries on its artificial recreation as a way of referring to a nature that hides in the cities - recreated as a fantasy in a corset. Inbetween tar or concrete, nature exists without space - The slanting, thick slice of sky in "Landscape" is a self-contained piece comprised of a beginning, a middle and an end. The taming of the sky consists in giving it a finite limit, turning its inconceivable scale into something manageable by the hands and body. Thus we deconstruct the fear that the sky might be spying on us, or the illusion that it is sheltering us dissolves. Faced with the reality (of war or terrorism) that the sky can be an aggressor and the planetary reality that it can pollute, be polluted, perforated, the protective hiding places let drop their masks. Such is globalization: the end of safe places.

The garden or the excerpts of nature recreated by the city appear as simulacra: pieces of camouflage. And on television (here, included in the piece "Trip to the Country"), an object that contains the whole world, seeing nature is like not really seeing it (because it cannot be touched, stepped on and we cannot smell it). At the same time, seeing it disappear is gaining awareness of widespread ecological destruction. Alain Roger does his best to separate the ecological concepts of environment from the concept (always aesthetic, according to him) of landscape; yet, it is precisely in the confluence of the two that the taming referred to by Catarina Leitão can be found, since in her work landscape fuses itself with territorial order, leisure, ecological concerns, intimate experience... etc. Nature in the city is not just a (un)desirable place, being itself a victim that must be protected from its surrounding environment; it is more than simply a denial of nature, because, after all, it "alleviates the sense of displacement"; it is more than something to be disinterestedly enjoyed, it is also something to be consumed; it is not spontaneous but fabricated; it is desired but unable to fully satisfy.

The city dweller is surrounded by his/her own representations of nature. A trip to the country is like a search for psychological protection against the fragmentation of identities imposed by the city. One hopes to find there a true identity, a lost authenticity. But all becomes harder and even more frustrating when country people are continually bringing urban signs of progress into their territory, thus deeply disturbing the city dwellers defensive aspirations 6. In other words, now, not even leaving the city is a true escape. Civilization has created a global system of self-reference, an elastic, all-pervading space which controls every movement away from it, bringing it back into its own sphere. On different levels of reality, this condition leads to a situation in which the very examples of nature in the city may seem increasingly more natural, being mixed, as if outside of it; thus becoming increasingly finer simulacra.

Henry David Thoreau (1817/1862), a famous wanderer of the 19th century, once wrote about his walks: "When we walk we naturally go to the fields and woods; what would become of us if we walked only in a garden or a mall? Even some sects of philosophers have felt it necessary to bring the woods into their world since they did not go to the woods, "They planted groves and walks of Platans where they took subdiales ambulationes in porticos open to the air"⁷. Lines like these show us how distant we are, in the modern world, from the way nature was then seen in the city. "That poor excuse for Nature and art which I call my front yard", says Thoreau.⁸

Concrete planters, trees that come out of holes in the sidewalks, flower pots, vases, window sills. Catarina Leitão also evokes the tighter places, the smallest containers, even those that can be bought and brought home in a bag. A world of household objects proliferates in her installations and drawings. Water-related containers - a low bathtub under a long blue cloud containing a lake and tree-trunks; a cloth container with water and a bit of green; a water-filled basin as grey as the cloth of the previous container, from which three small tree-trunks emerge. Furniture-inspired objects: an extremely short-legged chair upholstered with camouflage cloth (drawing) and a green sofa (part of "Trip to the Country"); a cube or module for the transportation of nature, similar to a TV set containing forest-like cut-outs, including a bird with open wings (drawing) or a three-dimensional cube in front of the sofa, also filled with bits and pieces (sculptural installation); a table of wood and carpet, under which rolls (tree-trunks) are tightly interwoven; a bed; a fan - tree-sized or larger - appears like a strange cement or metal being, standing in the forest (drawing) as a surreal device. Another piece affirms the playful tendency that many of the other objects express in a good-humoured commentary - a box on wheels, a wooden toy carrying two schematic trees, a miniature portable landscape; a round tent, whose grey dome covers a forest, subduing whatever tries to grow too high (drawing).

Finally, the bags. Felt bags with bits of "soil" and "grass" in them (referencing the camouflage fabric as well as the cutouts that appear through the exhibition), and from which rolls/tree-trunks overflow. Next to them, a folded blue blanket as a domesticated piece of sky. In a drawing, a backpack shows its green lining, and from one of its pockets, bare curved wooden trunks come out: a suggestion to carry nature on one's back.

Two things are usually taken for granted in this taming of nature by the city: the reduction of scale to facilitate consumption and a tactile bodily relationship turned into a controlled game, excluding all senses but vision - the unpredictable and wondrous. A green area delimits the place of every bit of "artificial nature" which each piece has transformed. The size of things becomes a powerful commentary on them: there is miniature, a quantitative reduction as in "Accessory", referring to the structure that encloses trees in the avenues (in this work, it contains little that can be considered a tree); or the gigantic, whose strongest expression can be found in the enormous grey coat. Life germinates inside its green lining: exuberant growths, unfoldings and appendages; an equally green stool, rolls and pieces of camouflage on the floor and green leaves peeping from inside an enormous pair of shoes. A tropical shelter immobilized in a garment/house hanging from the ceiling that finds its counterpart in a drawing: a sweater or dress on a tree trunk, a green leaf/scarf coming out of its neckline. The tree's clothing, usually made up of leaves, here is made of cloth.

This work reminds us of a 1999 installation, presented at New York's Hunter College as an MFA thesis: "The Body in the Garment in the Furniture in the Room". White coats, made to stand upright, practically as tall as the room in which they were installed, were lined with colors, lit up from the inside, and contained stools, beds or platforms to receive their visitors. They were outfitted for habitation, and some had sound. In an explanatory text, Catarina Leitão wrote about clothing and intimate spaces as containers - as a second skin - about surfaces for the representation of the self. She wrote about how furniture mediates between clothing and architecture, and how supposedly personal objects reflect standardized, conformist tastes. She referred to the private experience of the body as container, the

awareness of intimacy and an enclosed and solitary body facing screens (television and computer). Has not Marc Augé already suggested the possibility of an ethnology of loneliness?⁹

She also mentioned the experience of occupying, with color, sound, and dimensions, the inner skin of a place, thus expressing the perception of identity. She defined a place as a movable bubble we carry around our body and her exhibition as being about a place that exists among the body, clothing, furniture and the room. A place full of stories and memories and depth, and the present, past and future. *Natureza Domesticada* (Tamed Nature) is a body of work that has common points and continuities with this previous work: not only through "Your Private Garden", the coat piece, but through the idea that the successive layers that envelop us and protect us from the outside may also hold us and delude us with their folds and layers. Again quoting Georges Perec: "We all live somewhere, in a country, in a city of that country, in a quarter of that city, in a street of that quarter, in a building of that street, in an apartment of that building. We should have long ago gotten the habit of moving around freely, with ease. But we never did (...) then it was too late: we had become imprisoned in the folds of the place."¹⁰

It is out of a genuine taste and desire for walking, for moving around in the open air with the participation of all senses, that some dissonance regarding the city's taming of nature may grow. And if, in the places of passage, in transit, in the contemporary non-places¹¹, loneliness frames our projects, it is surely in bodily mobility, given to us by our feet, by the gigantic shoes in this exhibition, that we do not rely on the machines that move us around ("How many times do we drive a car through the mountains, enjoying the wonderful views without ever stepping out of the car?", asks Catarina Leitão in her text), that a true demand for nature becomes ingrained. Nature inside the city, within the possibilities of Men and of Nature itself as well as outside the city, within the possibilities of what it is and of what we "artistically" or ecologically want to do with it. When facing a picture, be it TV, film, photograph, electronic image, we must always remind ourselves that such things have no volume and cannot be walked upon: the "Immaculate Forest" in this exhibition is flattened against the wall, like some of the clouds. The mirror under the cloud in "Landscape" flattens the images of the place and of anyone looking in. Camouflage cloth is a smooth material that imitates vegetation and the waves of the earth.

The proposal that remains to be realized, then, is that we break free from the folds of our chrysalis and thoroughly use the short time of our brief butterfly lives to know the exact smell of a forest.

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1 Michel de Certeau, *A Invenção do Quotidiano, Artes de Fazer* [Brazilian translation], Vozes, 1990.

2 In the sense used by Marc Augé in *Non-Lieux*. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité, Seuil, 1992.

3 Georges Perec, *Espèces d'Espaces* [1974], Galilée, 1997, p. 93.

4 Alain Roger, *Court Traité du Paysage*, Gallimard, 1997.

5 *Artificial Retreat Devices*.

6 See Michel Conan, article "L'invention des identités perdues", part of *Cinq propositions pour une théorie du paysage*, Champ Vallon, 1994, Seyssel, p. 45.

7 Henry David Thoreau, "Walking".

8 Thoreau, *ibidem*.

9 Marc Augé, *ibidem*, p. 149.

10 Georges Perec, *ibidem*, p. 97.

11 For Marc Augé, non-places are airports, public transport, hotel chains, large stores...

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