

Venice Biennale – 51st International Art Exhibition
Critic text about the work of artist Laura Belém

From sunrise to sunset (and vice-versa)

By Rodrigo Moura

In January 2002, shortly before my flight landed in Belo Horizonte – my birthplace, to where I had returned after one year living in São Paulo – I glimpsed outside the plane window what seemed to me to be an oddly amazing scene, in the muggy summer night: the installation *As Damas* [The Ladies] (2002) that Laura Belém had set up on the columns of the Casa de Baile, now all lit up and reflected on Pampulha Lake. Laura, my former classmate in a drawing course taught by Amílcar de Castro, had recently opened an exhibition at the Museu de Arte da Pampulha, which I had joined a few months earlier in the position of assistant curator. Having struck me by surprise, this bird's-eye view of the work afforded me an unexpected, renewed perception of objects I already knew by heart. Ever since, I have associated this story with my core feeling about the work of Laura Belém: that it operates on the viewer's unexpected encounters and discoveries, and on relations that the artist establishes between people and things.

As Damas is a prime example of this. At the Museum (a former casino) as well as at the Casa de Baile situated across the lake from it, Laura dressed the phallic columns of buildings designed by Oscar Niemeyer with three huge skirts of red fabric. To spark the voyeur in each of us, the artist installed a telescope at the Museum that offered a vision of the same work set up in the other building (thus serving as a kind of mirror), at the same time disconnecting the spectator from the Museum venue – in a subtle, yet profound act of suspension related to the very experience of being in that space.¹

Years later, we worked together again at that same location. Then Laura's work *Enamorados* [Enamored] (2004) proposed another type of dialogue, no longer between the two buildings with the spectator in the middle, but between two body-boats positioned face-to-face in the middle of the lake. Every evening, from sunset until dawn, these boats exchanged alternating light signals, as if flirting or engaged in conversation. Significantly, their respective floodlights were turned on one another. Every 20 seconds, the floodlight on one of the boats would come on, leaving the vessel in total darkness and illuminating the other boat, whose floodlight was off. In subsequent phases, the boats simultaneously illuminated each other (obfuscating themselves) or remained together in darkness. The work established a series of allusions (some clearer than others) to games of seduction and traps of affection. In this sense, is it not revealing that emitted light serves to illuminate the other, rather than itself? According to Laura, this piece represents notions of "absence/presence, besides metaphors of contemplation and love."²

In parallel with her projects involving installation and sculpture, yet still paying the same attention to space in site-specific projects, Laura Belém recently created a set of sound pieces. Rather than relating to a specific segment of contemporary research with sound, these works draw their originality from various aesthetic sources. In them we find direct legacies from electroacoustic music; manipulation of objects on a table à la John Cage; appropriation and addition of pre-existing audio; field recordings; actors reading specific texts that the artist has created or appropriated; soundscapes of fairy tales; atmospheric orchestrations; and technical investigation involving quadraphonia and sound mixing. In some of Laura's pieces, thought about the site is central, and the architecture and symbolic or

functional significance of the spaces where the works are created and displayed play an intrinsic role.

One of the early works of this series, entitled *Escutura* (2001–2005),³ was designed for installation in external passageways or outlooks (at first it was installed in the gallery garden, near a bench and a tree). Different instances of animus and pitch level (equivalent categories in psychology and music, respectively) accompany the changes in humor that are typical of the human mind. The audio begins with a hypnotic birdsong that is brusquely interrupted by a new movement, featuring an insistent barking of dogs. Installed in the open-air, the piece becomes one with the commonplace experience of being in a space, invading the psychological scene of the spectator. Now and again we find ourselves standing before extremely opposed and distant poles. From then on, our mind will relentlessly apply itself to the necessary task of filling in the blanks.

1. For an aesthetic of the distant gaze, see *Rear Window* (1954), by Alfred Hitchcock.
2. Artist's statement to the author, January 2005.
3. This work's title plays on the words *escultura* and *escuta*, which in Portuguese mean, respectively, "sculpture" and "[the act of] listening." The work's date refers to both its first and its most recent showings.

Translation into English by Izabel Murat Burbridge.

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