

*Creativity and Sin*

Valeska Soares pursues the creative possibilities of what lies beyond accepted norms. Through her artistic practice she challenges boundaries, undermines traditional systems of power, and proposes alternatives to established narratives. Her work creates a world of constant oppositions and open-ended propositions that resist fixed categories of interpretation. A minimalist aesthetic mingles with a baroque sensibility, exuberance taints restraint, sin contaminates purity, and rationality is continually pushed to its limits.

It is amidst this unsettling tension and these constantly shifting spheres of reality that one locates the meaning of sin in her artistic practice. While "sin" is defined in biblical terms as a transgression of the laws of God, Soares appropriates this moral concept and situates it in a broader philosophical and secular context, in which sin assumes transgressive power. In the 1990s, Soares made a number of installations, sculptures, and photographs that explored aspects of faith, religion, and sin. Commissioned by SITE Santa Fe, the enigmatic installation *Sinners* (1995) evokes the interior of a church or chapel in which the artist has arranged a single row of seven low wooden benches. On each bench rests a slab of beeswax that retains the subtle imprint of a person who knelt there.

Like many of Soares's works, *Sinners* relies on viewer participation. The artist positioned motion detectors at the entrance to the gallery and inside the installation. These devices activated three sets of speakers embedded in the gallery walls, each of which was covered with a thin veil of fabric. The speakers emitted the sound of beating hearts, whose vibrations caused the veils to gently sway back and forth. At times, depending on the number of visitors and the number of speakers activated, the installation filled with a cacophony of heartbeats at different intervals and volumes. Like several of Soares's works from the mid-1990s, *Sinners* suggests the profound connection in Catholicism among ceremony, spirituality, and the exuberance of bodily references—the latter despite Catholicism's historically conflicted relationship to the corporeal and the spiritual. *Sinners* functions as a *mise-en-scène* in which the viewer is left to envision what has transpired. Lured into the space by the mysterious sound of beating hearts, visitors discover only the benches with their faint beeswax

*My work process has been involved with 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.*

— VALESKA SOARES

*The ultimate language of madness is that of reason.*

—MICHEL FOUCAULT, *Madness and Civilization*

imprints. As is often the case in Soares's work, absence and desire activate memory and imagination, enabling viewers to create their own narratives. By orchestrating a reductive environment, Soares imbues the work with a sense of melancholy and longing. Historically, one is reminded of the violent and oppressive legacy of the church and the authority and power it yielded over the masses.

*Sinners* is a key example of what art critic Eleanor Heartney refers to as "a realm of art that comes out of a certain religious sensibility."<sup>1</sup> For Heartney, "religion shapes the imagination of artists raised in specific artistic traditions even when they are not dealing overtly with the subject, and even when they have a conflicted relationship to that tradition."<sup>2</sup> *Sinners* was inspired by Soares's ruminations on the nature of sin. For the artist, "sinning is sort of an intoxication in and of itself. It means there is a border you have to cross... but not necessarily into something bad." She thinks of sinning as a "creative act."<sup>3</sup> While retaining a religious subtext, the artist places sin in a secular context that expands its signifying potential to encompass the transgression of all boundaries or systems of thought and behavior.

In *Sinners* and other works, Soares invokes desire as the impetus for transgression. Her creation of a realm of sensorial rapture that verges on the irrational suggests a baroque sensibility. This interest in baroque concepts is evident in her use of dramatic materials, such as roses and perfume, and in her juxtaposition of contrasting themes. Soares has cultivated the baroque, not for its stylistic qualities, but for its resistance to fixed categories of meaning and for its embrace of irrationality as a key form of experience and knowledge. For Soares, the baroque offers a paradigm of difference and hybridity that resists order and classification.

In 1994, Soares participated in the *XXII Bienal Internacional de São Paulo*, creating the installation *Untitled (from Fall)*, a work that conjures up references to Christianity and Adam and Eve's expulsion from Paradise. Like *Sinners*, *Untitled (from Fall)* occupied an entire room and relied on visitor interaction. Soares filled the space with hundreds of freshly cut roses that

were spread across the floor. Embedded in the wall at the far end of the room was a small beeswax niche that conveyed a sense of loss and mystery. In order to reach the niche, the viewer had to walk on the flowers, a physical and metaphorical act of transgression. Yet those who succumbed to this temptation were disappointed to find that the object of their desire was empty. And the nature of this transgression changed over time. Initially, the fresh roses filled the space with a pleasant aroma, but they soon began to wilt, change color, and emit the smell of decay. Their transformation functioned as a powerful metaphor for the transience of time and the fugacity of life.

*Untitled (from Fall)* is one of the artist's earliest works to explore the history of gardens, which inevitably references the Garden of Eden and the fall from grace. Symbolized by the eating of the apple, the fall from grace marked the acquisition of knowledge and of original sin. Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise into an untamed and hostile nature. Throughout Western history, gardens have been linked to the acquisition of knowledge, to the philosophical thinking of a particular period, and, as Soares notes, "to the desire to transcribe that [philosophy] into some kind of physical space related to [a] controlled nature, never nature in its natural state."<sup>4</sup> The desire to control nature is fundamentally linked to a longing for a lost paradise. The garden is a symbol of man's quest to control nature. This quest may also be likened to the desire to achieve the triumph of reason over irrationality.

Soares's belief in open-ended propositions and her interest in involving the public in her work are reminiscent of the experimental ideas of the Brazilian neoconcrete artists Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, and Lygia Pape. In the late 1950s, they challenged the traditional role of the artist as a creator of objects for contemplation and advocated a new role for the artist as an instigator of creation. Rather than defining the spectator as a passive observer, they defined him or her as an active participant in the production of meaning.<sup>5</sup> Of particular relevance are the "relational objects" that Clark developed out of her psychoanalytical research. These led her to

question the role of the art object and its relation to the artist/spectator. As art historian Guy Brett has observed, "Instead of an object in which her own expressivity was encoded, [Clark] proposed one that had no identity of its own. This object only took on meaning in relation to the participant's fantasy, and only in the act of a relation established with the body."<sup>6</sup> This relationship with the corporeal is significant to Soares's artistic practice in terms of her creation of heightened sensorial experiences that envelop the body and serve as triggers for activating memories and histories. Soares's installations often function as performance-based works in which the viewer is projected into the space as a performer/character. Her work develops anew with each interaction.

While *Sinners* and *Untitled (from Fall)* are critical works in the context of Soares's production during the last decade, a number of related objects, sculptures, and photographs made during this same period further expand her thematic concerns. *Wishes (from Sinners)* (1996) is a reliquary-shaped box containing folded pieces of paper on which the faithful have recorded their secret wishes. This piece is a powerful meditation on the intoxicating effects of desire and faith. *Untitled* (1997) is a cascading bundle of Holy Communion hosts precariously held together with saliva. Soares pinned this fragile object to the wall, challenging the inherent "sa-credness" of religious symbols and representations. Intended as an experimental work and never exhibited publicly, *Untitled* was prompted in part by the artist's discovery of the commercial availability of religious and church supplies.

In the photographic series *Fall*, Soares explores the theme of the body, blurring the boundaries between the sexual and the sacred, the corporeal and the spiritual, desire and repulsion. In *Untitled* (1993), Soares captures the dramatic image of a woman's hands, her fingernails painted in bright red nail polish, clasped in prayer against a rich, velvety background. Crossing the line between sexual desire and religious ecstasy, the photograph is unabashedly theatrical in its artifice. Equally dramatic is the disturbing yet beautiful photograph *Tear* (1993), which shows the tear-shaped scar on a

woman's chest. This mysterious shape could symbolize the searing pain of heartbreak. Or it could be an outward sign of disease, or even a sacred reference to the stigmata. All of these interpretations reveal the conflict in Catholicism between the body and the spirit. The body is simultaneously the site of temptation and of carnal sin, and the vehicle for spiritual transcendence.

Whether or not the meanings of these complex works are located in the realm of the religious or the secular is, in some measure, immaterial. Soares's art is consciously informed by an affinity with or sensibility for religion, but its creative motivation lies elsewhere. Her practice is guided by an ongoing interest in the paradoxical nature of systems that operate at the limits of reason. For Soares, religion is a belief code that relies on faith, or the suspension of reason. Ultimately, Soares is interested in unleashing the enormous creative potential that is activated when boundaries are transgressed and the systems of power embedded in fixed narratives are eroded. It is in these moments of unsettling ambiguity and earnest possibility that Soares asserts the subjectivity and multiplicity of meaning.

- 1 Eleanor Heartney, "Symposium, October 8, 1999, The Drawing Center, New York City," in *Faith: The Impact of Judeo-Christian Religion on Art at the Millennium* (Ridgefield, Conn.: The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000), 61.
- 2 Eleanor Heartney, "Art Between Heaven and Earth," in *Faith*, 63.
- 3 Valeska Soares interviewed by Vik Muniz, *Bomb* 74 (Winter 2001): 54.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 52.
- 5 Alma Ruiz, "Open Up: An Introduction," in *The Experimental Exercise of Freedom: Lygia Clark, Gego, Mathias Goeritz, Hélio Oiticica, Mira Schendel* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000), 20.
- 6 Guy Brett, "The Proposal of Lygia Clark," in *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th-century Art, in, of, and from the Feminine* (Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 1996), 419.

