

BEAUTY AND RECONCILIATION

IN THE ART OF JOANA VASCONCELOS

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I

Now, as occasionally in the past, there are many reasons to be grim and outraged, or sneering and cynical. These are attitudes that to some extent have dominated the arts for the past several decades, and we have often been instructed, pointedly or subtly, about gender, or poverty, or race, or power, or capitalism. I am not saying that these are not valid or necessary artistic projects. But though I want to be grim or sarcastic, because things are grim and sarcasm is called for, I do not only want to be grim and sarcastic, if I have any choice in the matter. I don't know about you, but were I to look back from old age and behold squarely a life of alternating indignation and arch amusement, I'd regret it, especially if, as seems likely, I had not succeeded in transforming the conditions that annoyed me.

Even in a world with much suffering and stupidity – or especially in such a world – I want to find moments of pleasure or even joy; every day I hope that small transcendences or calls to presence are possible. Through all the injustice and the struggle for justice, I also want moments in which I am grateful to be alive, moments in which I know the world to be beautiful. I want moments of affirmation, perhaps even of some things that are also, looked at from another angle, problems.

Joana Vasconcelos's work registers such moments, expands them, and makes them possible for others. There is a critique of culture in her work, but there is always, connectedly, a celebration. For delight too is a small transformation of current conditions, an act almost of defiance, a demonstration that we are not necessarily entirely broken and are not necessarily nothing but reflections, more or less distorted, of power. Delight can be an invitation to presence in our lives and in our cultures that shows that we are not merely instruments, but also agents.

Vasconcelos's breakthrough work *A Noiva* (The Bride, 2001–05), a monumental chandelier constructed out of tens of thousands of tampons, is characteristic of her work in this regard. No doubt it has a feminist message, though perhaps not a straightforward one; it is anything but merely didactic. It shows an almost superhuman industry, later supplemented in her practice by a large full-time staff. Its material translates the hardness of crystal into the softness of cotton, assembled with the tampons' own strings. It is a weaving, a diaphanous light source, an extravaganza of feminine hygiene, and also a sort of wedding gown. I am tempted to spend the next pages interpreting it in all these dimensions, exploring a hundred ironies and commentaries I might find in it or speculatively attribute to it. Sadly and hilariously enough, it proved too controversial to be installed at Versailles – which Vasconcelos transformed in 2012 – where it would have been precisely right. But what I want to emphasise about *A Noiva* is the first response, a purely visual delight, and then the experience of getting the joke, of connecting women's embodied experience to the aesthetic complexity and conspicuous consumption of a giant chandelier.

Vasconcelos's most directly political intervention from the same period of her output – is the kinetic sculpture *Burka* (2002), a figure enshrouded at the bust in a blue hijab, but then consisting of petticoats or ruffles of various fabrics, including lace and military camouflage, together with a miniaturised industrial crane or lift. The figure rises, pulled disquietingly by the head, and is then released, settling to earth as it opens and spreads like a parachute. Her later work is less politically explicit, but what moves here toward the later practice is the work's multiplicity, subtlety, and almost shocking beauty, its refusal of easy judgments or direct readings. The woman is dying, destroyed by her concealment or erasure. Or she is expanding, opening into layers of ravishing fabric. She is victim and agent, an object of pity but also a challenge. On the one hand, *Burka* can be read as a death or a martyrdom or even a crucifixion; on the other, it is an assumption of the Virgin, who shares the burka's blue. Or it is a release, a liberation into an ethereal beauty, a vision of paradise.

Perhaps even more emblematic of her work as a whole in this regard are the transformations of plastic tableware into filigree: the red, gold and black *Corações Independentes* (Independent Hearts, 2004, 2005, 2006). These reinterpret a traditional Portuguese jewellery form at a larger scale and use coloured plastic to create a gossamer effect, taking all the weight of a heavy metal and making it less dense and more vulnerable to the light, at once jewel and feather-like: the approach of filigree itself. Here again is domesticity, mass production, and also a reinterpretation of traditional visual vocabularies suggesting both jewellery and tatted lace, and yet the product is perfectly coherent, in part because it is so carefully and concertedly crafted in the atelier. The political weight here is reduced or deflected into the aesthetic experience; the work is more directly about visual traditions and repertoires of beauty and transforming them in size, materials, context: an expansion, critique, and celebration.

II

Craft, indeed, is central to Vasconcelos's effect: the product is professional, attended to by a number of experts, well made. In modernism and parts of postmodernism, the value of craft, both its aesthetic value and the relation of that value – for example, its beauty – to its use, have been discounted or even, for example in primitivist and expressionist moments, repudiated, as though skill were incompatible with aesthetic excellence or intensity or authenticity. The opposition of art and craft is a mirror of other oppositions, between mind and body, male and female, upper and lower class arts: the artist as against the mere artisan, serving direct bodily needs. But skill can be recuperated in an artistic practice that takes it as a first premise that the whole history of aesthetic values – those associated with men or with women, with peasants or with aristocrats – is ready really to be used, to be cherished and reinterpreted at new moments, for new audiences. To repudiate skill is perverse, one might say, ideological; skill is paradigmatically artistic in that it entails absorption in process for its own sake as well as for the sake of its finished product. This experience of immersion in process – the characteristically aesthetic experience which must unfold over time, and which inhabits time at various durations and intensities – can be shared communally as at Atelier Joana Vasconcelos. She herself compares the atelier to the studios of Renaissance or Baroque artists, which were systematic mechanisms for the cultivation and celebration of skill and intense collaboration as well as of the singular expressive vision. They were also, of course, businesses or sales rooms.

It is extraordinarily difficult to hold elements such as craft and expression, individuality and community, postmodernism and what comes after postmodernism, femininity and feminism, culture and capital, together in a coherent work, much less in a monumental installation. But Vasconcelos and her workshop on the waterfront in Lisbon manage to do that consistently. Her work teems with invention, and you can feel the pleasure of the artist in having ever-new ideas and impulses, a truly multifarious and creative practice that spins out new concepts, realises them on many scales, and communicates them to audiences at many sites in many pointed and yet lovely ways. And as the studio has expanded and the practice with it, the work that emerges is ever more intensely itself. It is made collaboratively, but it speaks with a singular and assured voice.

The dialogue with site is particularly intense in Vasconcelos's fabric constructions such as the series of *Valkyries* (2004 to date) The *Valkyries* are pieced together in the atelier from fabrics she collects, from the cheapest and most mundane to the most elaborately embroidered and precious. They are draped over and attached to bulbous or anatomical inflatable forms and then suspended in the places for which they were designed. They have reached gigantism, and the one under construction when I visited the studio ended up some 35 meters across. But big can mean different things; a *Valquíria* is not a brutalist headquarters or a modernist box; it is eccentric, soft, complex, and inviting as well as strange.

Gigantism can be a totalitarian strategy, as when it transforms whole landscapes into concrete bunkers or environmental disasters, or when it endlessly repeats the distorted visage of the dictator, now leering from everywhere. It matters what appears, and something large can be repulsive and explosive-proof, or it can be vulnerable or absorbing. The effect depends on what elements you want to pick out and celebrate and how, whether the material is opaque or translucent, whether you try to expunge or enhance what's already there, like wrapping marble statuary in lace, making you notice it again afresh, making it sexy. The giant constructions are also ways of filling and challenging large spaces, spaces of privilege and power such as Versailles or a Venetian palazzo. One reply to gigantism – or to the big booming architectural voice of powerful men – is to make beautiful miniatures. Another is to develop alternative gigantisms, organic ones, humorous or cuddly ones.

III

This, I think, is what Vasconcelos is up to overall: take something seemingly modest and expand it, drawing attention to it by making it more hugely itself, while also changing its meaning. As it gains in scale, the purpose is to retain an intimacy, which you can see gaining force at the smaller scales in her more domestic 'paintings', made as reliefs in fabric, or in her reuse and reconstrual of the faience ceramics of the Bordallo Pinheiro factory in Caldas da Rainha. But as her work gains in scale, it expands or opens existing vocabularies, such as traditional tile patterns, to refresh their capacities to give pleasure, or playfully to adumbrate or twist them until new possibilities emerge. The idea of hugeness is undermined even as it is re-emphasised. Vasconcelos is always teasing out the anti-totalitarian possibilities that lie all around us, waiting to be taken up.

Often these constructions seem to be beautiful alien creatures staging an invasion of the space, as in *Contaminação* (Contamination, 2008–10), installed in the Palazzo Grassi in Venice in 2011, which occupied

the central atrium and then sent off runners or tentacles through the galleries, around the sculptures, its colours entwined with those of its environment: an aesthetic parasite, but I think, basically, an unthreatening one. Vasconcelos herself compares it to the alien Sigourney Weaver battled, but I can't help feeling that the thing is a lot more benevolent than that. It means us no harm, and though it is weird, it's also cuddly. In its architectural setting, the intense colours and the soft embodied forms rearticulate and enhance and challenge the space, but also transform the experience of the art that was already there. They don't just give the viewer something to look at; they globally shift the phenomenology, the embodied experience of the space, in a way that alerts you to the antecedent meaning of that space in a different way and reminds you that you are yourself a soft body with various protuberances co-occupying it.

Fabric is the particularly right medium for such effects; it can quickly reshape a place without tearing it down, and it is in some ways an 'anti-architectural' material by virtue of its excessive flexibility; the opposite of the block of stone. A *Valquíria* is dangled from above rather than built from the bottom up on hard or sure or firm foundations. The Palazzo Grassi is at once celebrated and infiltrated. This can be a disturbing experience, but it can also be a pleasurable one: a return to the body that yields an aesthetic ravishment and a political critique at the same moment.

Vasconcelos's fabrics themselves are often chosen to resonate with the site, either on a purely visual level, as in the emphasis on gold in the installation at Versailles, or in the use of colour and form as cultural signifiers, as when she used the colours of a local football team. But at Versailles, the huge *Golden Valkyrie* (2012), installed in the War Room, appears to be the organic love-child of the inorganic furnishings, as though the rectangular spaces and the gold with which these spaces are covered or encrusted – and the hostilities which may have originated there – had given rise to a ravishing alien species now staging a rebellion against her parents. It manages to instantiate and elaborate the aesthetic of the place and period while also interrupting it or showing its elisions. The *Golden Valkyrie* has completely adapted to its habitat, but its habitat has also adapted around it, or been both re-mirrored and transformed.

The contrast with the installations of Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami at Versailles is instructive. They invaded the space with popular culture and their own familiar visual tropes in a way that almost snickered at the tastelessness or excess of Versailles, while also putting the products of contemporary capitalism into relation with the aesthetic of absolute monarchy. Koons could be critiquing consumer capitalism by parodying it, or the bottom line might be that Koons is himself a capitalist, an arch example of just the sort of thing he might otherwise be understood as attacking. It's hard to tell if the work is an example of what it appears to parody or ridicule. Well, it is both instance and critique, a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* of a capitalist approach to the visual that is also extremely expensive. It's hard to tell whether Koons thinks Michael Jackson and his monkey Bubbles, in gilded rococo outfits, are beautiful or ridiculous. Perhaps he is saying both, but it is hard not to experience these messages as clashing or the work as a standing contradiction. This discomfort or resistance to interpretation is precisely where the work plays or gathers meaning, as in Vasconcelos, but in a different register.

But Koons's work has a sort of distance and disdain, both for any place it happens to appear, and for the audience. I do not negate these possibilities. I think they are important. I think Koons explores them in a fairly

interesting way. But I am also tiring of the irony and the underlying strategy of using it to get over or become the pop-culture monster and rich person one started by undercutting through hyperbolic representation. And though the aesthetics of Murakami and Koons are not entirely unrelated to that of Vasconcelos – in the intense coloration or selection of materials (from porcelain to Mylar), for example – I prefer both the sincerity that Vasconcelos achieves, as well as her jokes. And I prefer her commitment to visual pleasure, which in her case is not being undercut at the same moment it is being achieved. And yet I do not think the relation to capitalism is any less ambiguous than in Koons, nor is it thematised any the less sharply.

IV

Vasconcelos's large works often require considerable funding, and the government of Portugal has long been broke. Her operation assembles corporate and institutional support and individual and gallery sales for extremely ambitious projects, such as transforming a ferry boat into a work of art and sailing it to Venice to be a pavilion at the 2013 Biennale. Let us say that the work, if it is going to happen at all, has to emerge from the funding procedures available today. Occasionally, the sponsorship is visible in the work (she built a bold pop bow out of perfume bottles for Dior, for example, and is working on a design for Swatch). The commercial aspect can be mundane. When I was in Lisbon in February 2015, I stepped into a gift shop near the hotel and saw, along with Pinheiro ceramics or knock-offs and other knickknacks, postcards of Vasconcelos's ironwork teapot and wine jug. It has been observed by touristy art critics before me that the taxi drivers and baristas in Lisbon know her work; in the course of a few days I got responses from 'My granddaughter? Six years old – she can do better,' to ecstatic groans of adoration and devotion. But the point is that in commercialism at various scales, and also within other circuits for the circulation of images and objects, Vasconcelos has both celebrated and rearticulated Portuguese visual culture in a way that must be rare in any given metropolis.

She explores and exploits, but to some extent is also exploited by, different ways into the public imaginary, whether it's advertising, postcards, the gallery or museum system, online videos, or in publishing – indeed, the catalogue raisonné *Joana Vasconcelos* (2011) published by Livraria Fernando Machado, is itself something of a monumental object, taking the utmost advantage of the book, though creating a rather weighty and intimidating thing in this case. And also, of course, in public installations. There are many contexts and media in which her images are circulating at any given time, an effect that is surely intentional.

To focus on the role of capitalism for a moment, no system of patronage is unproblematic, and as bad as the corporation might be, it is perhaps not worse in this regard than the exclusive patronage of the Catholic Church, or of Louis XIV, or of Emperor Tiberius, or of the Soviet Communist Party. If you are going to make large public works well, as I say, you are going to have to deal with the available funding sources and hope to bend them toward your own vision. But capitalism also has certain advantages in this regard. It is responsive to audiences in ways that many such systems are not: it wants to give people what they want, though it also wants to channel what they want, which is the purpose, after all, of advertising.

But consider, for example, the careers of Louis Armstrong or Bob Marley or The Notorious B.I.G.: subversive artists, but also commercially potent ones. In their work, produced and promoted by corporations,

an important set of cultural critiques, and also beautiful works of art, emerge compellingly into the context of mass culture and consumption. There are many corporate interests and cultures, and so capitalism tends to yield more varied iconographic programs. And the popular culture produced under its auspices has, of course, been an incredibly rich source for reinterpretation in the fine arts, from the uses of jazz in 20th-century art music to the practices of pop and postmodern art.

Even as it uses this situation and also sometimes gets framed within it, Vasconcelos's work constitutes a sophisticated commentary on it. She understands consumerism to be a locus of pleasure as well as exploitation: she wants to use it (and everything else she gets her hands on) and to find in it what can be affirmed. But nor does she want to be simply absorbed by it, to lose distance from it, to stop using it and start being used by it. The relationship is never simple, but it is dedicated, as in the whole oeuvre, to finding what can be used to help make a world which people can enjoy: not as a clean utopian vision, but a way of mutating, twisting, and softening what exists already, pulling strands of it together from various historical and contemporary elements, a way of transforming rather than erasing what has gone before. The pleasure her work's yield is never merely the pleasure of consumption, though it does not just attack or negate that pleasure. It queries it, expands it, and subverts it by turns and keeps hinting at something else over the horizon, in which systems of power are slowly transformed by a hundred deflections into systems of pleasure, fully human anti-systems.

V

Here we might think of some of the elements of 'modernism' or the art of, say, 1860–1960: a demand to begin again on a more satisfactory basis, an aesthetic concomitant to communism and other utopian political philosophies: the search for a clean or uninhabited or uninfested aesthetic space in which to work out a new world, as in, for example, the architectural projects of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe or Oscar Niemeyer. The space of modernism is a new space, and it expresses hostility – for which there are many reasons, some of them good – to the cluttered-up spaces that are already in existence, and to the clutter itself: the vast aesthetic detritus left to us in our cities or our homes. The problem with this as an aesthetic strategy in the visual arts is that as each cohort purports to refute or expunge the previous one, you are eventually left without a valid or unerased or undeconstructed visual repertoire. This is one reason Jean-François Lyotard located the postmodern in the breakdown of metanarratives, and in the arts we might speak more broadly of the breakdown or ironisation of many visual/material/sonic/spatial/semiotic systems.

The past, of course, is the site of many oppressions, and domestic spaces and objects, in particular, are overloaded with gender codings and valuations. In postmodernism, these have been alternately intensified and undermined, a complex and extremely self-conscious process in which every material and object is a semiotic as well as a material agent and occupies meaning space as well as physical space. I think postmodernism's approach to such material, rejecting the repeated utopian erasures of modernism, was to redeploy it in various ways that both celebrate and attack it. One might consider, for example, Jenny Holzer's work in relation to advertising, or Mike Bidlo's in relation to the visual repertoires of modernism itself.

Figures such as Holzer, or in different ways, Damien Hirst or Claes Oldenburg, cut through or undercut such semiotic systems while also epitomising them. That is the structure of irony, or, more pointedly, of sarcasm: you are talking about or blowing up the sort of thing that, by talking about it and exaggerating it in a certain way, in a certain context, to a certain audience, you are ridiculing. One way of viewing postmodernism is that it clears the ground, in a different way to modernism, or makes possible the constructive reassembly of the materials that have been, as it were, disinterpreted. The postmodern redeployed visual materials from the tradition and reminded everyone of their availability to be sampled or reconstrued, which perhaps ended up making room for more constructive understandings. In a way, we have *less at stake* now in refuting or attacking... anything. Postmodernism opened the way toward new sorts of constructions that are much more than commentaries, that are also celebrations: from the dub music of King Tubby to a less fraught reinterpretation and redeployment of the feminine.

Modernism reduced the terrain to rubble over and over, even as it sought to build something new and lasting: as I say, a utopian procedure. But it left precisely a terrain covered in rubble, which is also a building material. Traditionally, more modest or human or decent dwellings are built from the debris left by the wreck of empires. Postmodernism has been picking over the debris, while chortling about the disintegration and collapse. But the question arises as to what might be built out of the materials available; the possibilities it opens toward creation; the places it might help make that are not just 'posts', but are inhabitable now.

Vasconcelos is always alert to what can be picked out and affirmed; she is always exposing historical or commercial materials that can be broadened or re-experienced in new contexts, turned against themselves or redoubled into self-celebration. It's a way of trying to open from what actually exists into a possible future: not one in which everything is entirely transformed, but one in which the possibilities are multiplying and expanding. Her studio director Lúcio Moura told me that he thinks that 'left' and 'right' as political categories should be replaced by 'closed' and 'open'. I think so too. And then the project might be not to expunge the past or critique it, or for that matter to enjoy or repeat it uncritically – though those possibilities are not precluded – but to find what in it can be, under transformation, used again, seen afresh, both in relation to what it was before and with an eye to what it and we might become.

A Noiva and *Marilyn* (2009) – the insanely delightful spike heels realised on a huge scale and made out of pots and pans (it looked ineffably perfect at Versailles) – do this with gender. The male/female thing has been oppressive or brutalising in the art world as at Versailles, among other places. But of course it has also been the locus of pleasure and possibility; the gender system has always been undermining itself from within. And it has distinguished male and female visual cultures in various ways, and not only because women are subordinated by the male gaze. Gender constitutes or is constituted by a vast set of usable tropes, and our gendering has given rise to gendered arts that transform bodies or spaces: the places and products of men's and women's work.

The crafts and skills in which 'women's work' is embodied have always been sites of oppression and resistance, of constrained labour but also of individual and collective self-expression and self-expansion, shelters in the gender storm. Also, because some of the arts of fabric, for example, have been treated as feminine and discounted for that reason, they have also opened up as almost clandestine spaces of

women's solidarity, an unsurveilled – partly because approved – space from which surprising things have always emerged. To take one example: though heroic male-ish painting only managed to find abstraction around 1912, the fabric and jewellery arts have been vast areas of abstract exploration for centuries. Segregated spaces have always also been central sites of resistance, at once artefacts of oppression and the places from which resistance blooms.

Certainly the monument and the monumental, whether it is the war memorial or the fortress or palace, or a utopian transformation such as Niemeyer's Brasilia, are interestingly gendered, or might even be conceived as male-supremacist. Vasconcelos's approach to the monumental addresses this aspect, neither directly affirming nor attacking it, but playing with it and replacing it. So in 2008, in *A Jóia do Tejo* (The Jewel of the Tagus), she draped an ancient fort, the Torre de Belém, with a necklace of buoys, as she has added lace to bridges, castles, and sculptures. Where many of the monuments in which she intervenes show a sort of austerity or dignity, she coaxes them and their makers and their inhabitants to play, or to find some comfort in the course of their long exposure to the weather, to come off the stoicism a bit: she seeks to domesticate the monument, or take care of it, bring it comfort or a little love, or put it back in dialogue with its female other.

For that, she must herself work on a monumental scale, and bring different iconographies to bear, always in respectful relation to the original; she is not merely negating or attacking the Tower, but letting its context and its history be freely remade. The practice criticises and celebrates traditions simultaneously, and does it with a lightness or sweetness which is more than an ironic commentary, a real enhancement and reinterpretation. Anish Kapoor's reinterpretations of the monumental and public are perhaps connected to such practices, though they are less historically resonant. Both artists' work seeks out affirmative deflections of deeply problematic aesthetic practices.

Where postmodernism's relation with the symbol systems it deployed was still often tense, now – partly as a result of postmodern art practices themselves – these systems begin to lose some of their weight, or become available in different ways. They are *in play*, mutating all the time, with different groups or regions or subcultures appropriating or reversing one another's styles and symbols. Vasconcelos's work does not at all ignore the history and the oppression, but it looks within them for ways out, ways they undermine themselves, moments of beauty, ways of affirming and transforming and even intensifying the differences, removing at the same time some of the dead weight from them, showing them as arenas of play. Among other things, as many a comedian has understood perfectly clearly, gender is *funny*; it puts us all in drag and puts us in a show. What it might be without the subordination and the suffering, what it might be as an arena of pleasure: that's what these works are about. And that's what I want to know.

VI

The relation of Vasconcelos's work to Portuguese visual traditions and ways of making such as crochet, ironwork or Rafael Bordallo Pinheiro's vocabulary in ceramics also show this structure. (Indeed, the Bordallo Pinheiro factory and the exceedingly broad range of manners and mediums of the man himself – from caricature and illustrations to his astonishing yet also often commercial ceramics in organic forms – are

precedents for Vasconcelos's approach.) The traditions are not regarded as a dead weight to be overcome, or, on the other hand, as a nostalgic idyll. Instead, they provide a great wealth of visual materials that can be opened, with respect, into new interpretations and dimensions. It matters, of course, that Pinheiro's work is characteristically Portuguese and Vasconcelos is among many artists of this time who – as opposed to Kapoor, for example – are reaffirming the local in various ways as against the globalisation of both modern and postmodern styles.

Vasconcelos's practice identifies with and cherishes the traditions that it redeploys. But the work is not at all characterised by solemnity or reverence or recapitulation. The work is not reactionary in that sense; it does not merely return to tradition. But nor does it merely grab it casually, or throw traditional elements willy-nilly into the postmodern mixer. This, I think, is one way that art can move into a next period: neither a return nor a negation, but a way to be informed by or identify with visual traditions without being subordinated by them, a knowledgeable and respectful but also insouciant – a competent and craftsmanlike, but also confident and playful – reinterpretation.

There is little sense of anxiety in her respect for these traditions, little explicit effort to be true to them. And yet even amid all the translations of genders, materials, scales, sites, there is respect nevertheless. The past is not merely repeated, and is not merely negated, but is shown to harbour indefinitely many possibilities for re-creation. Vasconcelos re-unfurls these traditions in a world of contemporary materials, sites, and artistic practices. The encounter of old with new, at its best, begins to collapse the distinctions, or expose continuity between superseded visual worlds. Vasconcelos's work shows how history can happen without annihilation, how things can change without being negated, how we can find something in almost everything that is worthy of love and repetition and expansion, and find places in our world now into which they and we can expand. Even the critical moment is wielded in a constructive project. Joana Vasconcelos weaves things together rather than ripping them apart.

VII

In this regard, we should focus on the work in crochet and lace, and there was a circle of people crocheting when I visited the atelier. The work is communal and individual; it is traditional, constructive, and perhaps addictive. In Vasconcelos's rethinking, specific motifs from the tradition – specific patterns for the web – are redeployed and reinterpreted, or opened up and made visible by being made to wrap unusual things or perform new functions.

Fabric is at once the most humble and the most profound of aesthetic materials, the most mundane and the richest in metaphysical implications: the fabric of the universe is a fundamental image, from creation myths to contemporary string theory. Fibre brings many meanings simultaneously, or has more possibilities than any medium: it can register as ephemerality or durability, embodiedness or entrapment, expression of the self or concealment of it. Few arts can be more ancient or more universal yet more distinctive to a culture than making clothing and blankets and nets. But fabric is still underappreciated as a medium at the upper end of the art world, in part because of the insistence on the distinction between works of art and practically useful things, or between art and craft.

One fine arts precedent for Vasconcelos's work in lace is Faith Wilding's *Crocheted Environment*, first shown in Los Angeles in 1972. Wilding created installations in fabric that surrounded and sometimes threatened to enshroud or entangle the viewer. These are often read merely as political, the forms as vulvic, and so on, and Wilding's art is no doubt feminist in a variety of ways. But it is also aesthetic and meaningful in many registers. Again, there is a commentary on tradition and on women's work, but there is also a web or network aesthetic in Wilding's fabric installations, an image of a universe that is both closed and open, opaque and transparent, a grid or a chaos of knots, a sprawling landscape of connections and disintegrated connections.

Wilding's work in some ways emphasises the ways that fabric or string sags, tangles, and disintegrates, as does Eva Hesse's, for example. Parts are finished into lace-like forms, but parts remain loose, or unattached, or messy. I think of these works as simultaneously constructions and deconstructions; they are ephemeral, and the right way to preserve them would be to let them slowly fall apart. But Vasconcelos's work is fundamentally constructive, or we might say characteristically optimistic. It portrays a universe in creation and expansion, a universe being knotted together as we speak, or coming to be at a greater rate than it is ceasing to be, in which new connections are forming faster than old ones are fraying. What I am saying is that it also represents such a moment in the art world, or I hope it does.

Here the bigness signifies, and Vasconcelos's fabric constructions might be compared in this regard to the work of the Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto, who creates ravishing crocheted environments that also serve as furniture or playground equipment, or constitute habitats for plants while echoing their forms. Neto also is concerned to make the process collaborative; he sees the work as complete when it is inhabited; it is meant to be participatory and also a potentially fun or transformative situation rather than an object; it is conceived as extended in time as well as space. The participation entails wear, and of course all fabrics, even universes, fray. Neto also uses his installations to completely rearticulate problematic spaces or the architecture of power, as in his installation *Leviathan Thot* (2006) at the Pantheon in Paris. In a different key, the interior of Vasconcelos's pavilion for the 2013 Venice Biennale, *Trafaria Praia*, the redeployed ferry that once plied the Tagus and was navigated to Venice for the event, creates an inviting environment, here a gorgeous blue surrealist seraglio, rendered in sumptuous fabric and light.

Vasconcelos's profound yet also very delicate and light-hearted *Varina* (Fishwife, 2008) extends such participation in all directions, in particular the temporal. The finished piece is a magical diaphanous billowing cloth installed on Dom Luís I Bridge in Porto.¹ It is monumental in scale for a textile work – some 3,000 centimetres, or about 100 feet across – and yet it appears modest as it both ornaments and undermines the apparently opposed aesthetic of the bridge's steel girders. It was created by women of the region, perhaps a thousand of them, who crocheted pieces in their homes, which were assembled in larger local spaces and then made into a whole under the direction of Vasconcelos and her assistants, mobilizing the Porto region into a huge quilting bee. Pattern traditions and amazingly complex geometrical abstractions merged into a kind of cloud from one side, the most delicate and pleasing of screens from the other. It spent five days on the bridge, weathering the elements; it may wrap other objects or monuments in the future. And it matters not only that you are wrapping things, as Christo, but what you are wrapping them with and why.

Varina is readable in many ways from many angles, through political or art-historical lenses. One can appreciate it for the ways of making that give rise to it, for the many connections to community that it opens up. But none of these aspects would mean the same without its beauty, its joy, its great lightness of heart and play with the wind. Indeed, perhaps more important than the question of whether Vasconcelos's work is part of the emerging next phase of art is the question of whether art, in whatever next phase it may have, can again be something worth loving. *Varina* makes me think so.

VIII

Perhaps movements such as feminism or arenas of human endeavour such as the arts need moments both of disassembly and of construction, a postmodern and a post-postmodern (popomo) phase. Only it would be nice to get beyond postness without creating further postnesses. There is a moment when it is urgent to tear down or ridicule or even enjoy as kitsch the visual culture around you; Andy Warhol had that distance; Robert Rauschenberg; Oldenburg; Koons. But there are signs in, for example, Keith Haring or Mike Kelley or Rirkrit Tiravanija, or Banksy, of an intention to re-enchant art, precisely by placing it into relation with the quotidian, bringing it back to ordinary life and vernacular culture in order to let each bring out the beauty of the other, to let them refresh and reinvigorate each other freely, pausing to make the value judgments later, or letting the values emerge for the viewer in the encounter with the object or process.

One worthwhile parallel would be the large ordinary objects of Oldenburg, at once literal and wildly cartoonish: caricatures, we might say, of everyday things. They are also quite hilarious, which can make up for a lot, and the bigger the clothespin, the funnier it is, other things being equal. They at once celebrate and ridicule the ordinary artefactual surround. Vasconcelos's *Miss Jasmine* (2010) and *Sr. Vinho* (Mr. Wine, 2010), a monumental teapot and wine jug, immediately suggest that sort of ambiguous postmodern intervention, but on closer consideration undermine it or overcome it. The works are constructed in a traditional style of vernacular ironwork that at a distance becomes a lace of arabesques. You can see right through it, but it gently shapes and screens your visual field, while also engaging various visual and craft traditions. The teapot has been more thoroughly transformed than has been Oldenburg's spoon or typewriter eraser, and yet it is gently celebrated, drawn in iron in real space. *Miss Jasmine* and *Sr. Vinho*, like all the wrought iron sculptures produced at the atelier, are worked by a blacksmith and are unique. Another jug, *La Bonbonne à Vin* (2011), is installed at a French vineyard, and a teapot at a museum in Seoul owned by the country's largest tea company. In those contexts and in others, the work is funny without being derisive.

I have been to some extent emphasising the collective origin of Vasconcelos's visual materials, and the collaborative nature of her atelier. But her work is – as are, in one way or another, the objects and environments created by Haring, Kelley, or Banksy, or for that matter Wilding and Neto – fiercely individual, even as they involve many people in one way or another. That is itself important to their collective effect; they allow each of us to envision ourselves as possible agents of a visual transformation of our situations, a way of taking space that to some small extent literally transforms reality. They are signs of the possibility of visual agency, we might say, and it is important in that regard that they are extremely individualised and idiosyncratic as well as collaborative. Like street art of various kinds, Vasconcelos's work is a collective

effort and uses recognisable tropes but is also an act of self-identification and self-assertion, the mark of a serious resolution to make the world look different in accordance with a personal style. In this case, the utopian transformative element is tempered but also enhanced by an earthy sense of humour combined with, aesthetically, a lightness of touch.

This too strikes me as something that would be desirable in a next phase of art: practices that do not lose the highly distinctive voice of the modern and postmodern art monster, that still harbour the possibility of unaccountable flashes of personal visual genius. But we also need to take into account the collapse of the concept of genius, its reduction to absurdity in Warhol, Koons, or Hirst. It is a male thing, by and large, and involves conditions of egomania and self-absorption, encouraged by adoring audiences, that easily nudge into personal and cultural pathologies. It makes actual people over into imaginary gods, tortured by the enormous roiling forces in their gigantic heads. But a collective practice – a practice which repeats traditional motifs or tries to remove or vitiate individual deviations – is just as problematic; it is what forced modernism into being in the first place. Vasconcelos's work deftly negotiates this dilemma, using collective traditions and collaborative practices to create works with a definite point of view, a characteristic style, a new angle. We human beings are neither alone nor not alone, neither merely part of a collective consciousness nor entirely external to it, and perhaps it is time for an art that shows our dilemma: alone and yearning for companionship, together and oppressed by our shared identities.

Many of Vaconcelos's themes and moves, which are so varied in materials and scales and even styles, can be understood as trying to find new ways to negotiate the apparent opposition between the individual and the collective in the arts. That negotiation is present in her dialogue between craft traditions and postmodern appropriation, in her dialogue between male-dominated contexts and feminine visual vocabularies, in the relation of Lisbonian localism to the international market. Aesthetically and politically, we stand in need such rearticulations of individuality and collective identities, new modes of reconciliation. If the things that embody it can also be beautiful, the reconciliations will feel fated.

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In storage at time of writing, *Varina* (Fishwife, 2008) can be experienced via video, http://www.joanavasconcelos.com/video_en.aspx?oid=823&vid=66