

**THE SPACE OF  
REFLECTIONS:  
TERESITA  
FERNÁNDEZ'S  
FATA MORGANA**  
BEVERLY ADAMS

Teresita Fernández's *Fata Morgana* is composed of six canopies of organically shaped, perforated, gold metal discs erected twelve feet above the paved walkways that border the central Oval Lawn in Madison Square Park. Extending a total of five hundred feet in length, it is both the artist's largest work and the most ambitious temporary artistic intervention commissioned by Madison Square Park Conservancy. From a distance the installation appears to be a series of intricate shade structures for the use of those walking through the park or sitting on the benches. While the piece does in fact provide shade, its three layers of double-sided mirror-polished discs also reflect what is above and below; constantly changing, they appear and disappear for those who pass under and look up. The title *Fata Morgana*—a reference to an atmospheric optical illusion that occurs just above the horizon and to a poem written by the French Surrealist André Breton and illustrated by the Cuban artist Wifredo Lam—begins to suggest Fernández's many lines of inquiry that led to the project.

The image of the work as an optical illusion hovering over the six-acre urban park is as compelling as its formal and conceptual affinity to paintings by Lam. Observing Lam's work from the early 1940s is a bit like trying to fathom a mirage. Figures within his abstracted paintings seem to be pulsating just on the edge of being. In *L'arbre aux miroirs* [*The Tree of Mirrors*], 1945, for example, delicate black paint strokes coupled with flashes of hot pink, purple, and gold loosely define shadowy areas, which in turn contrast with areas of unpainted canvas (fig. 1). Only a sudden density of brushstrokes signals the edges or shadows of something that might be taking shape.



Fig. 1 Wifredo Lam, *L'arbre aux miroirs* [*The Tree of Mirrors*], 1945. Oil on canvas, 39 3/4 x 49 1/2 in. (101 x 125.7 cm). Collection of Diane and Bruce Halle, Phoenix, Arizona



The emergent figures are simultaneously defined and erased by the brightness of the canvas, generating an illusory experience. Fernández has acknowledged an interest in Lam's work, especially these figures that seem to appear and disappear—or, as she says, that are “hiding in plain sight.”<sup>1</sup> Lam recognized the power of this ambiguity at a time when artists from Latin America were expected to somehow perform their identity in their work and convey political and social issues:

I wanted with all my heart to paint the drama of my country, but by thoroughly expressing the negro spirit, the beauty of the plastic art of the blacks. In this way I could act as a Trojan horse that would spew forth hallucinating figures with the power to surprise, to disturb the dreams of the exploiters. I knew I was running the risk of not being understood either by the man in the street or by others. But a true picture has the power to set the imagination to work, even if it takes time.

The experience of *Fata Morgana* is that of seeing and not seeing, interacting with a distorted panorama that constantly recombines as one moves. A mixture of sky, people, trees, pavers, grass, and buildings becomes visible and is then obscured as the next series of juxtapositions unfolds. Made for a moving audience, the installation works in concert with the park and its surroundings to facilitate dialogues among the ambulatory spectator, the site, and the elements. As in other public commissions by the artist, like *Seattle Cloud Cover* and *Bamboo Cinema*, which was installed in Madison





Square Park in 2001, *Fata Morgana* demonstrates Fernández's interest in cinema, light, and vision, and an expanded understanding of landscape as place and also as the history of people in a place.

Installed in the park for almost a year, *Fata Morgana* has changed with the seasons. On a cloudy day, the walkways may appear gray and tunnel-like because of the muted sky and reflected concrete. This sensation can at any time be interrupted by a shock of color from a group of people walking below. In the summer, intense light projects gold reflections onto the pavers and carries the bright green grass overhead. The intricate pattern of shade generated by the leafy shapes of the canopy mimics and mingles with the shade cast by the trees in the space between the end of one canopy and the beginning of the next. Time of day, daily weather conditions, and the changing light of the seasons alter the experience of crossing the park and walking its paths. As *Fata Morgana* fragments and constantly recombines its surroundings, it makes possible a physical and visual experience that unites people, earth, and sky in flickering, unstable images.

The activation of this cinematic feature of *Fata Morgana* relies on the spectator's physical engagement with the work. It is precisely this participatory aspect that establishes its social and political dimension and links it to certain artistic propositions developed in the 1960s. Interest in the body and the sensorial, and in the relocation of art into social space, led many artists in Brazil and France, for instance, to experiment with the construction of subjective experiences rather

than stand-alone objects. The importance of one's whole body in understanding a work, as well as the notion of a work's being activated by a viewer or requiring bodily participation in order to be complete, stems from writings on phenomenology by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and from Umberto Eco's discussion of the "open work."<sup>3</sup> These ideas compelled artists to consider authorship and the creation of the meaning of a work of art as essentially shared, and as a way to empower viewers. In Brazil, Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, among others, sought to merge art and life by transforming the viewer's experience from one of just looking to one of feeling. They created simple objects and sensory environments that invited tactile engagement and prompted a heightened sense of self-awareness (fig. 2). The critic Mário Pedrosa described these types of proposals as the "experimental exercise of freedom."<sup>4</sup> Within the context of a military dictatorship in Brazil, the notion that ideas were no longer pictured but could instead be revealed to anyone through sensation and interaction represented a potent approach to art-making.

The experiential intention of Fernández's *Fata Morgana* has similarities with situations and environments created by Clark and Oiticica in the late 1960s and the 1970s, and shares key concerns with public works by Carlos Cruz-Diez, part of the Kinetic art movement in Paris. His work is distinguished from Brazilian participatory experiments by its reliance on vision and movement rather than deeper explorations of the sensorial, yet it shares the same democratic impulse. Cruz-Diez designed his work to "expand the field of human experience, making



Fig. 2 Hélio Oiticica, *Tropicália PN2 and PN3*, 1967 (installation view, *Nova objetividade brasileira* [*New Brazilian Objectivity*], Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro). Wood, fabric, plastic, sand, gravel, rose-ringed parakeets, black-and-white television and tropical plants, dimensions variable.  
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Fig. 3 Carlos Cruz-Diez, *Labyrinthe de Chromosaturation (Chromosaturation pour un lieu public)* [*Chromosaturation Labyrinth (Chromosaturation for a Public Place)*], 1969. Plexiglass and wood, twenty booths, each 48 x 48 x 108 in. (121.9 x 121.9 x 274.3 cm). © 2015 Atelier Cruz-Diez/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

it more subtle and complex” by reframing our experience of color in everyday life.<sup>5</sup> For Cruz-Diez, to make contemporary art was precisely this imperative to respond to the society of the moment and to create events “where the dialogue between real space and time is present.”<sup>6</sup> In 1969, he installed a temporary work, *Labyrinthe de Chromosaturation (Chromosaturation pour un lieu public)*, at the Odéon subway exit on the Boulevard Saint-Germain in Paris (fig. 3). Comprising twenty lit cabins constructed of colored plexiglass, the work made physical Cruz-Diez’s proposal that “color is constantly in the making.”<sup>7</sup> The artist selected the charged space of Place de l’Odéon because of its recent history in the May 1968 student clashes with authorities and because of its use by people from all social classes.<sup>8</sup> Accessible and inclusive, the work was designed to generate physical, cinematic, and emotional experiences of color.<sup>9</sup> As one moved through the spaces of the labyrinth, the colors of the cabins overlapped and mixed with the ambient light of the day and night, providing ever-shifting lenses through which to make sense of one’s place in the surrounding city.

Similarly, in developing *Fata Morgana*, Fernández painstakingly considered the history and present-day context of Madison Square Park, which is visited by 50,000 people each day. By using the existing walkways as the site for the work, rather than plopping an independent sculpture on the grass, *Fata Morgana* is directed to people who repeatedly traverse the park. The artist is especially interested in making visible what she has called “invisible publics”—users of the park who are not necessarily just neighborhood

residents, but also those who work in and commute to and through the area. Fernández wanted the piece to function as an “image-generating device” that amplifies the presence of these communities as they become part of the work.<sup>10</sup> To add a heightened sense of visibility, inclusion, and shared experience, she organized a series of performances under *Fata Morgana*. With the poet Emanuel Xavier, she planned a poetry and spoken-word event with readings and performances featuring Sandra María Esteves, Bonafide Rojas, Machete Movement, and True. She also invited Yesenia Selier and Global Rhythms to lead Afro-Cuban dance workshops that culminated in a Día de Reyes (Three Kings’ Day) procession. Día de Reyes celebrations were, in colonial times in Cuba, an opportunity for enslaved Africans to invert the power relations in their world. This was the only day of the year when they could openly perform in public and experience freedom.<sup>11</sup> These happenings transformed and disrupted the social space and use of the park in a way parallel to *Fata Morgana*’s effect of distorting Cartesian space. They appropriated, inverted, slowed, and celebrated the everyday use of the park’s pathways. Most important, they expanded the park’s public and reinforced the presence of the city’s Latino community, a group not always recognized as being part of the space.

Describing the transformative power of *Fata Morgana*, Brooke Kamin Rapaport writes that Fernández’s work “dignifies and crowns the everyday urban experience of walking in a public park. Under the *Fata Morgana* baldachin, a habitual act is transformed into ritual. The pedestrian’s avenue is aggrandized.”<sup>12</sup> This transformation is

literally the case, because the paths are, in a sense, decorated by *Fata Morgana*, but the experience becomes more potent because those who pass below are acknowledged by the work: they are both seen and shown. Although public, the space of the experience is intimate, granting the viewer a moment of self-reflection. Walking under *Fata Morgana*, we look at the ground, at the space ahead, and above, and become keenly aware of our place within the park and our fleeting participation in the work along with others. This recognition is empowering, even if it is a transitory sensation.

Artworks in which everyone has the same physiological or kinesthetic experience or where participation and self-discovery are the guiding principles are necessarily constructed as entirely open, inviting structures, informed by the artists’ interests and research, but stripped of any directed narrative or personal iconography. As Fernández has said of those who take part in her works, “There’s nothing to ‘get,’ by simply being present they become indecipherable from its effect.”<sup>13</sup> *Fata Morgana*, an enormous, shimmering sculpture often mistaken for architecture, can in fact be read as no more than a device engineered to provide a democratic, collective, yet personal moment—one of introspection and belonging, surprise and disorientation—and the opportunity to experience a daily walk in or commute through the park as “ritual without myth.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>David Adjaye, "Teresita's Fernández's Golden Age" (interview), *Cultured*, April 2015, <http://www.cultured-mag.com/golden-age-teresita-fernandez/>. The notion of things hiding in plain sight is one Fernández mentions not only in regard to the paintings of Wifredo Lam but also in reference to work by Robert Smithson. See also "Teresita Fernández Interview with Anne Stringfield," in David Louis Norr, ed., *Teresita Fernández: Blind Landscape* (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, in collaboration with the Institute for Research in Art, University of South Florida, Tampa, 2009), 120.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Max-Pol Fouchet, *Wifredo Lam* (New York: Rizzoli, 1976), 189.

<sup>3</sup>Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception* (*Phenomenology of Perception*) was first published in 1945. Umberto Eco's *Opera aperta* (*The Open Work*) was first published in 1962.

<sup>4</sup>Mário Pedrosa, "La Bienal de cá para lá" (1970), in Otilia Arantes, ed., *Mário Pedrosa: Política das artes* (São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 1995), 283.

<sup>5</sup>Carlos Cruz-Díez, *Reflexión sobre el color*, (Caracas: FabriArt, 1989), 78. Translations from this book are by Carolina Freimanis.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 5. "All of my previous experiences with color helped me create a support structure that would allow me to materialize and demonstrate the changing condition of the chromatic experience. The solution I found to the eternal binomial form-color was to divide the form, transforming the colored plane into a succession of color parallels placed vertically. . . . This structure allowed me to prove that *color is constantly in the making*, that it happens in time" (emphasis in original).

<sup>8</sup>This work was the result of a call by the Centre National d'Art Contemporain for public projects to create a "Kinetic-Light Environment." The commission was intended for the Place du Châtelet, but the artist suggested instead the Place de l'Odéon. Cruz-Díez stated of his preferred site: "Laborers, professionals, students, people of the bourgeoisie, all would pass through there. . . . There was a political or social intention of choosing that site at the moment." See Estrellita Brodsky, "Carlos Cruz-Díez's Public Works: The Power of Color," in Gabriela Rangel, ed., *Carlos Cruz-Díez: (In)Formed by Color* (New York: Americas Society, 2008), 10–13.

<sup>9</sup>For a discussion of the connection between Cruz-Díez's work of this period and structural film, see Gabriela Rangel, "New Mythology," in Gabriela Rangel, ed., *Carlos Cruz-Díez: (In)Formed by Color* (New York: Americas Society, 2008), 28.

<sup>10</sup>Teresita Fernández, telephone interview with the author, November 20, 2015.

<sup>11</sup>While Three Kings' Day is January 6, the Madison Square Park procession was held in July. Fernández also organized an interactive dance event led by Stephen Petronio titled *Luminous Mischief*.

<sup>12</sup>Brooke Kamin Rapaport, *Teresita Fernández: Fata Morgana*, exhibition brochure.

<sup>13</sup>Teresita Fernández, e-mail message to the author, December 3, 2015.

<sup>14</sup>Lygia Clark characterized her collective way of working in the 1970s in this way. See Guy Brett, "Lygia Clark: In Search of the Body," *Art in America*, 82, no. 7 (July 1994), 57.

