

Nowhere is the third in a series of installations by Maria Thereza Alves, all of which have had succinct names which are themselves about naming. *No Soy Su Madre (I Am Not Your Mother)* was the first and alluded to the kind of epithets man has traditionally used in reference to nature, such as 'mother nature', 'virgin forest' and so on, into which he projected his attitude toward the female gender. The second, *Post-Eldorado Amazon*, suggested that while it might be easy for us to see through a fifteenth-century Spanish fantasy of a remote, discoverable 'place of gold', as a narrow and lamentable obsession, the mind-set which gave rise to it is still with us, still driving our actions and thoughts.

'Nowhere' is a translation of the Greek word Utopia which Thomas More used to title his famous book of 1516. He thus used a word that sounded as if it denoted a land or place but which actually meant no-place; or, alternatively, he used a word that apparently meant no-place but actually posited the possibility of a real place. This is not such an arcane distinction as it might appear, because if the apparently nowhere eventually becomes somewhere, it never sees that place or people as it is, but as the *tabula rasa* for the projection of the utopian fantasy. It is to this mismatch between actual place and mental construct, and its dire consequences, that Alves' installations address themselves.

The first impulse to make a work dealing with the notion of utopia, or re-valuing it, arose from the experience of speaking at ecology meetings across the U.S.A. Alves was a founder member of the Green Party of Brazil in 1988, and works as a political activist and writer on environmental issues as well as an artist. She was born in Brazil (her father came from the village of Butia in the state of Parana in the south of the country), but lived in North America since childhood, receiving her education, and eventually her art-school education, there. At these ecology meetings the question of the Amazon would inevitably arise and some green would propose 'saving' it by prohibiting people from living in it and even fencing it off entirely.

Earnest proposals, well-intentioned, revealed themselves as just the latest in a long line of utopian appropriations of South America. Moore's *Utopia* itself was written in constant reference to the discovery of the New World, whose land and people were taken as example, as material, for intellectual discussions which were assumed to be entirely European. This applied, whether one saw that land and people through counter-reformation eyes as an unenlightened hell to be saved by missionaries, or

through liberal-humanist eyes as a model society whose freedom from the injustices and afflictions of Europe was only marred by its failure to 'use' the land properly. From her own 'between' perspective, Alves is in a good position both to identify with Brazil and to see clearly the myths that have constructed it, both outside and inside the country itself (to see, in fact, that modern Brazil is partly constituted by Europe's fantasies about it, that the issue cannot be reduced to a here/there, we/they conflict or resolved on the basis of the nation state).

Nowhere incorporates quotes from Western utopian works through the centuries. Many of these emphasise space. Alves sees the re-organisation of space as crucial to utopian thinking (as well as an aspect natural for visual art to explore). It is the primary, or final, means of the transfer of the mental construct to the actual place, and the demarcation between all that is included and good and all that is excluded and bad. Her installation itself does not appear to be explicitly didactic or polemical, but to hover ironically between the constructive and deconstructive. The wooden structure running the length of the Central Space suggests the utopian construct which turns the real space into a non-space, but it is made of debris and scavenged fragments. It partly hides photographs taken in the Amazon by Alves which themselves deny the expectations of landscape photography with its high-contrast, ideal and awesome view of nature, not by trying to posit a contrary, but by a certain kind of lateral or unspecific view. These pictures in places disrupt the geometric floor-plan of a church, or are wrapped around pieces of brick and rock as if in a sort of solidarity with the material they are supposed to represent. Wooden fragments, both natural and man-made, apparently form another collection of evidence from our most immediate vicinity of the traces of a demarcation too obvious to be noticed.

In answer to a question about how she viewed the relationship between her political and artistic work, Maria Thereza Alves replied that politics employs strategies to accomplish specific tasks, but art is about 'questioning'. This seems to me the only way to unravel a notion such as utopia, for its meaning is so bound up with our different histories and the complexities of the mutual cultural clashes and exchanges which make up our identities today.

This unravelling would have to separate those aspect which are universal from those which are local. Even the universal aspects of utopia are torn between the poles of

human folly and human longing. The follies arise simply from the fact that we are all culture-bound. The Indian writer Sudhir Kakar has pointed out, for example, how odd the current Western fascination with shamanism must appear to “someone belonging to a culture where the shaman is part of everyday life, and shamanism is as exotic as dentistry”. (Who, here, would be turned on by the notion of the artist-dentist?) And Kakar goes on to suggest that the way the current fascination has replaced its opposite, the previous ethnographic denigration of the shaman, is a symptom of “the Western search for utopias”. From another perspective, the Chinese writer Lu Xun criticised the



naivety of his educated countrymen who were sent by the Emperor to Europe at the end of the 19th century to learn from Western ways: "Read their notes today! What struck them most was a wax-work figure in some museum which played chess with a living man."

Human longing is obviously much older than the genre of post-Renaissance utopias. The longing for abundance and plenty in the artistic and mystical traditions of agricultural peoples, the longing for equality, and for overcoming difference and distance, in the traditions of carnival reversals, the longing which is actually expressed in the name "Brazil", which according to one theory, derives from the Celtic word for 'the place of admiration' -- supposed to be located on some islands just south of Ireland where if you were lucky the gods would let you see them: all this would have to be separated from the utopia concept. Maria Thereza Alves sees the Western notion of utopia as arising with the Renaissance idea of individualism, and essentially as interpreting the desire 'to be free' in terms of a plan. Utopia proposes a planned future and explicit control over human potential, usually one person's idea of what that potential could be. She writes: "Utopias perhaps cannot serve as models since they are very specifically drawn up. They are not open enough to allow for the possible potentialities that humans require in a model."

In this necessary dialogue, and complex questioning of our histories, if a Brazilian has to counter those aspects of Western utopian thinking which were inseparable from invasion, colonisation and enslavement; an English person, for example, has to see that our imperial attitude was not innate but also a construct, and that even some of our prominent symbols of national cultural identity opposed it, at root, in terms which still carry force today. In 1759, Samuel Johnson published an imaginary speech by an American Indian leader about the coming of the Europeans:

"... These invaders ranged over the continent, slaughtering in their rage those that resisted, and those that submitted in their mirth. Of those that remained, some were buried in caverns, and condemned to dig metals for their masters; some were employed in tilling the ground, of which foreign tyrants devour the produce; and when the sword and the mines have destroyed the natives, they supply their place with human beings of another colour, brought from some distant country to perish here under toil and torture...."