

## **ALICE-VILLE**

por **Belén Gache**

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### ALICIA: THE CITY, THE WORLD, THE BOOK

*Alice-Ville*. The City of Alicia. A city that functions as much as a museum as it does as the world. Alicia's own world, an obligatory inter-textual quote from *Alice in Wonderland*. As is the case in Lewis Carroll's work, where the text envelops us in a labyrinth of word games and linguistic paradoxes, here we also find ourselves faced with an inversion of the laws of perception, without being able to designate one point of view as having priority over others.

But another characteristic dimension of the city as museum also appears in *Alice-Ville*: the city as a book. If the city of Alicia is the museum where her visual and anamorphic games are displayed, the museum is also a book that opens out in space. It is a country of text, just as Wonderland is, where the reading space is similar to the reading of space (to employ a Carroll-esque play on words), *Alice-Ville* is like one of those pop-up books, that undergoes metamorphosis as it unfolds, full of surprises. Each one of her works would be like a page, a chapter, and also an event.

### WORDS AND THE EFFECTS OF MEANING

- Which way? Which way? – Alice asks herself in Wonderland.

In both ways at the same time, Giles Deleuze would say in his text *Lógica del sentido*. Deleuze, who analyzes philosophical aspects of Carroll's work in said text, suggests a logic based on the absence of meaning in discourse, in language and generally speaking, in all symbols.

Meaning is immaterial and disembodied. Meaning is only a superficial effect like an optical effect or a mirror effect (*effet de miroir*). And here the inter-textual quote comes from *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*. The first work in *Alice-Ville* is a poem with two words presented along side one another: FUGAZ – INSCRIPCIÓN (fleeting – inscription). The word "fleeting" is a shadow projected on the wall. The word "inscription" is etched into cement. Roland Barthes spoke of two kinds of writing: that of inscription, incision, mark and that which corresponds to irreversible writing (cuneiform letters, hieroglyphics; that of the Law, History and Monuments); and that which caresses a surface (ideograms traced with brush or felt). Just as in Alice in Wonderland, the series unfold in both ways at the same time: eat-speak, body-language, body-disembodied, in Alicia Herrero's work, meaning unfolds towards both opposite ends: inscription (the word-substance, thing or re-presentation of the thing) and fleeting (the disembodied word, a mere effect of meaning).

### THE CASTLE AND THE FOREST. SHADOWS

Far from presenting us with a universe of innocence, fairy tales present us with existential conflicts and associate them with fears, dreams and above all, nightmares. Fairy tales are full of castles and forests. Castle and forest are also presented as a pair of opposites: the castle is the center; the forest, its periphery. The castle represents the interior, a refuge but confinement as well, with its towers and walls. The forest represents the exterior, the dangers and inhospitableness of the outdoors.

In fairy tales, however, castles as well as forests turn out to be enchanted, and each presents their traps to us. In *Alice-Ville*, we are also confronted with a series of traps and optical illusions. We are shown, for example, that the castle must be viewed in a particular way; a cone of vision will determine its perspective. On the other hand, the cut-out forest in *Alice-Ville* projects its shadow and turns into a mythical space, gloomy and hidden. Like in fairy tales, the changing shadows lead us to suspect that this space is inhabited, mysterious and menacing.

In 2002, Alicia Herrero created the piece titled *Bosque* (Forest). It consisted of a notebook with blank pages. Beginning with the action of drawing and re-drawing the same vignette of a forest with continual, progressive movement that adds, repeats and differs strokes, Herrero converts its pages into spaces with an infinite number of ways to follow, confuse with one another and lose. The book-forest. In the end, perhaps all books are nothing more than forests of words. The shadows:

In Turkey, the *Karagoz* exists. In Java, the *wayang purwa*. The theater of shadows has been developed in many countries, including India, China, Indochina, Persia and Asia Minor. Its practice is often associated with services for the dead.

In *Film*, a work from 1999, Herrero presented five vignettes of scenes from fairy tales cut out of sheets of aluminum. Light directed upon the metal sheets projected distorted shadows onto the wall. The shadows, disembodied phantoms, invite the activation of the imagination and dream narration.

### WORD GAMES AND PLATE GAMES (SETS)

In *Alice-Ville* there are games played with meaning, with light, and there are also games with plates. Once again the pair material-immaterial appears and once again the Deleuze-esque pair, eat-speak and body-language.

Lewis Carroll's works refer back to the Victorian social context, which enjoyed inventing parlor games as well as sports – cricket, rugby, tennis, football and croquet. *Alice in Wonderland* is a text full of games: card games, chess, croquet, races, and above all, linguistic games and also the famous tea game from the famous episode of Alice and the tea party.

In Victorian and Edwardian England, afternoon tea was a formal ceremony, a ritualized encounter that motivated the use of the house's best porcelain dishware and the faction of different cakes, sweets and cookies.

In addition, visitors and guests would be present. In the chapter *A Mad Tea-Party*, there are a series of peculiarities. Given that it is always six in the afternoon, the table is continually set for tea. The guests, on their part, are far from being reasonable people: a hatter (it was common to associate hatters with madness at that time, given that mercury was used to treat felt and this element has toxic effects on behavior, going so far as to imply madness in cases of prolonged exposure), a March Hare (there was a saying at the time, "*mad as a March hare*", because the mating season for hares began in that month) and a dormouse, a character who practically speaks in his sleep.

In a piece produced for the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen (Rotterdam, 2000-2002), Alicia Herrero presents a series of dialogues that take place between giant cups and saucers, similar to the human body in their dimensions. Is it the utensils who have grown, or it is the human beings who have been reduced in size? In *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice eats a piece of a magic mushroom and, while awaiting the effect it will have on her organism, she asks herself: Which way? Which way? The body will shrink or grow but, in constant metamorphosis, it will never remain the same.

A tea set also implies a finite collection of elements related to one another, a structure of kindred objects. Herrero would set this off with her piece called *Conversaciones* (Conversations), a work based on dishes that the public will contribute to the work as it progresses, while we note a progressive, exaggerated and potentially infinite accumulation of different pieces. Quite the opposite from a traditional tea set, here the pieces are heterogeneous, without pedigree, illegitimate, "multi-racial" and "multi-generic", questioning what is the same as well as that which is different and what is successive versus simultaneous. *Conversaciones* is nothing if not a forest of teacups.

#### A VANISHING EMPIRE

In chapter V of *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice suddenly finds herself in a shop. Just like that, the Queen has become a sheep who attends the place while knitting a wool garment with fourteen knitting needles at a time.

What do you want to buy? – the sheep asks Alice. Alice looks at the shelves, full of all kinds of curious things, but the strangest thing of all is that every time she tries to fix her gaze on a particular shelf, that shelf in particular seems to be empty. In vain, she tries to decipher what the shiny object is that is on the shelf right above the one she is looking at, which seems to be a doll at times and a toolbox at others.

In the video *Imperio* (Empire), a still image seems to construct and deconstruct itself before our eyes, always vague and diffuse. Just as in a Rorschach test, we take pains in the attempt to reinstate its contours, imagining its forms. With a bit of luck, we realize that it is a photograph of a set of Empire porcelain, taken from a Christie's catalog.

### THE KEYHOLE AND THE MIRROR

As Martin Gardner points out in his famous text *Annotated Alice*, a meticulous study of Lewis Carroll's work, secret rooms and doors were common themes in the Victorian era. Houses were built with hidden spaces and passageways and the fantasy of looking through the keyhole was commonplace, as evidenced by the romantic novels of the era. The space where the video *Imperio* is projected yields a surprise: there we discover a connected secret room where a ceramics studio has been set up.

The action of spying through hole in the wall maintains strong similarities with looking into a mirror: in both cases a space opens up before us. In both cases we are confronted with the fantasy of passing through to the other side. The wall and the mirror are not constituted as limits, but rather as passageways between a here and a there, between one logic and another. The immateriality of the video image is juxtaposed with the materiality of the ceramicist's real body. Empire porcelain, fetishized as sumptuous objects in auction houses, here is turned into evidence of production conditions, hand crafting, into work.

### SOWING SEEDS OF TIME

The Administration area of the Museum is intervened with a series of plant nursery boxes, a kind of mini-garden that will be installed on the day of *Alice-ville*'s opening and that will remain there until the end of the show, monitored and watered with technical assistance.

To continue with fairy literature, we have, once again, a frequent theme, that of the castle that disappears engulfed by the disproportionate growth of the surrounding forest's vegetation. Here also, it will be growth, the logic of the process, that will predominate, but in this case the museum castle city will be invaded from inside, at the very heart of its administration. Process, growth and movement imply becoming, and time. It is time that will go on occupying, gnawing away at and asphyxiating the museum castle's will to eternity. Chronos and Aeon: everyday time (bodily time) and the disembodied time of Eternity enter into conflict here.

### WHICH WAY?

In Alice-Ville, real space and real time are fictionalized.

Real time, that of accumulating utensils, of work, of organic plant growth, or of the body is converted into the works' motive and materials. On the other hand, as happens with the White Rabbit's watch in Wonderland, time's very logic is subverted: the work *Conversaciones*, being conceived of as a process, will wind up concluding on the last day of the show and not on the day of the opening, as traditionally happens. In addition, the exhibition involves a series of changes in the institution's cyclic routine, among them, a change in the hours during which it is open to the public.

As regards real space, like on other occasions when Alicia Herrero worked with paper museums (constructed out of images of works taken from art books and catalogs), here space becomes a spatialized book, just as the *Magazine in situ* (2004-2005) project also becomes a spatialized magazine, in real time and space.

Questioning the limits between reality and fiction brings us to question the space-time effectuation of events. Following Deleuze's logic, it is not the space-time occurrence itself that constitutes it as such, but rather the added plus of signification that the viewer provides. The event is constructed like an ensemble of singular, sensitive and critical points.

Disembodied and immaterial, meaning is only the effect of meaning. How should the castle be viewed in order to really see the castle? How can you look at the forest of shadows? "Which way? Which way?", asks Alice and asks yet again Alicia, the other Alice.

BELEN GACHE.

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