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THE ART OF LYGIA CLARK

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Abstract: This text deals with Lygia Clark's poetics, which is based on openness to experience. It was sought here to highlight her sense of art, mainly from the analysis of her works. In her initial production she was linked to constructivism, but she develops her art in a radical way, seeking to effect a more determined connection between the viewer and the work. She goes beyond the limits of her field of work when she gets involved with the therapeutic practice, when she engages in the exercise of restructuring the subject. It can be seen, however, that, in essence, the guidelines of his plastic thinking remain. As a sense of her poetics, there is a certain cosmological nostalgia, as her interest is the experience of an original experience, which aims to reflect on the vices, conventions and conditioning that culture delimits.

Keywords: Lygia Clark; Contemporary art; Brazilian art.

To return to the origins is something that is at the heart of Lygia Clark's poetic proposal. Research on her art is advancing, favored by the opening of her archives and access to a greater number of works on display to the public. But it is always time to reflect on a poetics that is based on openness to experience and, as such, capable of new formulations of meaning.

The path traced by Lygia Clark is quite curious, as her initial production was linked to the constructivist project, whose language is mathematically based, therefore rationalist, but little by little she transgressed the limits of this guideline and came, finally, to change fields, involving up with therapeutic practices. So, she leads us to think about the art object and its absence, and conducts herself, professionally, first as a painter, then as a proposer, not an artist, to dedicate herself, finally, to questions related to psychoanalysis. Clark accomplished what

an artist of her stature must do—she was at the forefront in pushing the limits of her work and transgressing those of her practice. Our question here, therefore, is to better understand the climate of his production, to probe the meaning of his poetic proposal.



Figure: 1. Lygia Clark. *Baba antropofágica*. 1973

Source: Clark, 1980, p. 39.

One of Lygia Clark's strangest propositions, especially for the general public, is Anthropophagic Baba (Figure 1). The feeling of disgust is also possible in the face of such art. It is a collective and quite interesting proposition, as it makes us reflect on various issues and opens us to a wide universe of meanings. The organic character of the whole experience is one of its main characteristics. The action consists of the gathering of individuals around a subject lying on the ground. This participant is blindfolded, which provokes the awakening of other senses. The general instruction is for everyone to place a spool of sewing thread in their mouth and begin unwinding it. The line does not just work as an analogy to the

drool, the slime that is expelled through the mouth, but, associated with this bodily fluid, it highlights its color, making its physicality more impregnating and, perhaps because of this, more impacting on the imagination of the members of the action. The rite that is established, for some, can be experienced as a simple game or even in a more theatrical way, but it can have an even more visceral sense, of total surrender of the subject to the action. We must always remember that the reactions can be the most varied, including those of disgust and repulsion. Lygia's conception of this proposition is linked to a dream that insisted on taking over her mind, however it does not represent it. She tells us:

It all started from a dream that haunted me all the time. I dreamed that I opened my mouth and constantly took a substance out of it, and as this was happening I felt that I was losing my own inner substance, and this distressed me a lot, mainly because I kept losing it.¹

The curious thing about this case is that, after the realization of *Baba Antropofágica*, she has just one more dream of this type. In it, however, the movement is one of introjection of the substance, returning the expelled matter to the mouth. And after that, not a dream about it anymore. The absence of this imagery occupation is then qualified as a symptom of normality.

It is interesting how Lygia Clark becomes productively involved with the therapeutic practice, when it aims, in some way, at the restructuring of the subject. The terrain is based on artistic practice and mainly on the reflection on the relationship between the viewer and the work of art. The old works entitled *Stairs* already brought some ambiguity, because in this space there was no defined guideline. What's your meaning? go up or down stairs? This time of doubt already places us in front of an experience that is

itself unstable. Although the title of the work alludes to the stairs, there is a tension there. In question, the look. Clark then tensions the plane, checks its thickness, absorbs the frame and this way, points out the importance of the experience, its temporality. The plane is no longer characterized as a support of illusion and shows its dynamism, its temporality in its continuity in space. The artists Mondrian and Malevitch were decisive influences on Clark's reflection on the plan. The idea of a world without objects, by Malevitch, and a painting without objects, by Mondrian, is decisive. This last artist was also vital in relation to the idea of a total art, of an aesthetic order to be realized in life, in the world.

With "*Bichos*" (*Animals*), at the II Neoconcrete Art Exhibition, in 1960, that Lygia Clark put into effect the idea of the spectator's participation in the work of art. The success of these pieces was immediate. Its sculptural aspect is interesting, but it has a playful side, as it allows variations in its form. It is an "open work", whose title aims to reinforce its organic side and stimulate the public to touch. The pieces, however, are made of polished aluminum or brass, therefore typical of the industrial production system. Its cuts are precise and immediately show its mathematical character, its constructive geometry. In fact, their appearance is not very organic, as some have shiny surfaces and are perhaps not solicitous to touch, to manipulative inspection. In any case, the decision on involvement rests with who ventures into contact. In fact, the poetic side of the piece can be glimpsed in the movement of the plates, in this body contact. Its transitory forms erupt in the flow of time, and, at the limit, the action can encompass the very rhythm of nature, in a more nervous pulse and wheezing or other possibilities arising from experience.

1. CLARK, Lygia. **Lygia Clark**. Textos de Lygia Clark, Ferreira Gullar e Mário Pedrosa. Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 1980. p. 39.

Another outstanding production by Lygia Clark is the proposition: "Walking". The notion of artistic object is called into question here. It is constituted from the Moebius strip, whose characteristic is to have a continuous plane, in which there is no side or reverse. For the action, the participant uses scissors and determines its cut, its path. In fact, the work only exists for those who interact with it, because what matters is the subject/object imbrication in the flow of time. This instrument, tape and scissors, is a mere motive for the poetic act, whose essential meaning is the restitution of a lost unity.

With the proposition *Caminhando*, Lygia Clark starts to focus on direct work with the body, always aiming to involve the spectator in a participatory action. It is not, however, the playful issue that is vital for her, but something more fundamental, that is, generating exercises that allow the subject to restore his naturalness in the involvement with things, with the world. Clark wants, finally, to provide the spectator-participant with a unique existential experience, to rediscover the primordial unity between being and world.

Clark's work is guided by knowledge through experience and, at the limit, enabling the subject to detach himself from the vices and conditionings of the rational world. What underlies her propositions is the idea of breaking the boundaries of the classical dichotomy between man and the world. This traditional duality has its roots in Cartesianism, determined by a scientific ideal based on mathematical physics. Descartes sought to build a rigorous system, based on a rational method, with geometry as the main guideline. This model of knowledge implied a progressive mathematization of nature. Although Clark worked with geometric

shapes, she did not compose her plan and then project it into space in a purely rational way, as expression was fundamental there. Also, as we have seen, notably from Os Bichos, her aim is to integrate the viewer and the work. As it turns out, she was averse to traditional dichotomies.

Clark penetrates the sphere of intimacy, realizes that his space is vast and open. We see in his poetic conduct an interesting relationship with the philosophy of Gaston Bachelard, who tells us: "The being of man is an unfixed being. Every expression unpins it".² In his text "The dialectic of the exterior and the interior" he criticizes the geometrizing culture arising from Cartesianism. So, this process of rationalization of man and life had as a response the fixation of the being in geometrically defined limits. In this regard, he further states:

from the point of view of geometric expressions, the dialectic of exterior and interior is supported by a reinforced geometry where limits are barriers. It is necessary to be free from any definitive intuition – and geometry registers definitive intuitions.³

Sensory Gloves is a classic proposition by Clark in relation to the question of conditioning that culture brings to man. The objective is to make the spectator rethink the tact. The action consists of trying on gloves made of different materials and textures and picking up balls of different sizes and weights. It is then verified that a heavy glove demands more effort to execute the movements. When the subject removes the glove and repeats the action, he perceives the same objects differently, as if for the first time. It is about a rediscovery of touch and awareness of the conditioning that life imposes on man.

2. BACHELARD, Gaston. A dialética do exterior e do interior. In: **A poética do espaço**. São Paulo: Abril Cultural, 1980. p. 495. (Coleção Os Pensadores).

3. Idem.

To launch the body and exploring what is in its genesis, that is, its opening to the world, is how our artist instructs. It was certainly in the practice of his experiential, sometimes reductionist, propositions that Clark approached more psychoanalytic issues and led himself to the field of therapy. In the titles of her works one can already see the ruminating of these questions in her poetics. By naming her sensorial phase of *Body Nostalgia*, she makes us realize the meaning of a primordial, original experience, not shaken by the vices of culture. In her clothes-body-clothing series, she discusses the duality in the relationship between male and female in the use of clothing that hides the subject's sexual identity. Questions related to sexuality are then recurrent in her propositions. Other impressive titles are: "Cesariana", from 1967, "Máscara-Abismo" and "Camisa-de-força", both from 1968. Thus, in this propositional game, the dive into intimacy, the questioning about the body, but also about the psychic bonds of the subject, and the urgency of a re-semanticization of the lived experience.

A synthesis of Lygia Clark's work is the installation *A Casa é o Corpo*. Its illustrative character is noteworthy, although it also reveals reflective intentions about the unconscious. The main issue in this proposal is to make the subject relive the archaic memories that inhabit him, the ghosts of the lived experience. In this work, with regressive characteristics, the artist seeks to rescue the intrauterine experience.

It is also highlighted in Clark's propositions, as we have already pointed out, her reductionism. This can be seen, for example, in decisive propositions in this sense, such as *Nostalgia do Corpo: diabo* and *Ovo-Mortalha*, both from 1968. The first one was made for the *Bienal da Bahia*, and the dialogue in question is only sensorial,

not goes through the verb. The aim is for the subject to rediscover in himself other possibilities of communication. Words are not always the best way to express certain intentions. *Ovo-shroud*, on the other hand, is a work without any guidelines for use. It is simply plastic sewn to an onion bag. What matters in this case is only the action that is developed by those who decide to establish the poetic game. It appears, therefore, that the question of the mediation of the object is an important point in Clark's poetic project. This reductionism is symptomatic of the reflexive urgency that involved the non-artist in this theme. What is interesting, however, is that she poses the problem plastically, as we have pointed out in relation to the propositions above and especially in the work carried out during the period when she taught at the Sorbonne and also in her final phase, when she develops relational objects.

It was between 1970 and 1976 that Clark worked at the Sorbonne. Collective practices characterize his production from this period, based on propositions open to free participation and with an unstable meaning, as it is always constituted in presence. An important point in this work is the reflection on the action developed, the moment of speech, the "vomit"⁴ impressions and sensations of the experience that occurred in the group. Certainly in this period, the proposer, without hesitation, opens her field of action in such a radical way, which brings her closer to the therapeutic practice. In these actions then developed, the search for the emergence of freedom, the experience of the precarious and the communicative indeterminacy are sought. The exercise implies, however, resizing and incorporating these practices into daily life, but also assimilating other forms of expression. In most of the exercises, Clark proposes that

4. CLARK, op. cit., p. 41.



Figure 2. Clark. *Flor: relaxação*. 1974

Source: Clark, 1980, p. 43.

the participant close his eyes and make the other senses work. In *Flor: Relaxação* (Figure 2), from 1974, one of the participants lies on the floor, blindfolded, while the others touch him with flowers, so that he can remember experiences and activate new perceptions. The practice works differently for those whose vision is blocked and who suffers the intervention of the group. Thus, he starts to constitute his universe of images from the other senses, from the body in its entirety. As Merleau-Ponty well observed: “It is not the eye that sees. Neither does the soul. It is the body as an open totality”.⁵

For the practices of this period Clark conceives the notion of “body-collective”⁶ and considers there to be an “exchange of psychic contents” between the participants in the action. A little theatricalization can be perceived in these practices, which take into account each individual in particular and everyone in the “collective body”. Accepting the practice, however, implies involvement,

the imbrication of bodies, constituting an expressive and dreamlike game, being surprised by laughter and screams, therefore something closer to the organic and, sometimes, with a more visceral sense.

Another interesting work from this period is *Túnel*, from 1973. For this proposition, a long cloth, 50m long, is used, and the idea is to penetrate it as if it were a tunnel. The game of shapes that is created unexpectedly, according to the participation of the interested parties, is sometimes seductive. Even so, feelings of discomfort may occur on the way, such as difficulty breathing. In this case, Clark always brought scissors to open holes, create slits of light and air in order to continue the course.

Something also perceptible in Clark’s poetics is the understanding that not every game takes place without difficulty, as is typical of life. Some effort is needed in the adventure of discovery. In his text “The pain of the body”, the critic Tiago Mesquita

5. MERLEAU-PONTY, Maurice. *A natureza*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2000. p.367

6. CLARK, op. cit., p. 41.

speaks to us with more commitment about this issue in Clark's art: "The experience of art has dimensions of discovery, but not only of what is pleasant. Clark embodies the unpleasantness, the excessive, the concealed".⁷ And still in that text, but specifically about his experience of the Tunnel proposition, he records: "...it was aesthetically strong. Even because of what she carries as undesirable. To know and bring out undesirable aspects of the personality".⁸ In this regard, we remember then the feeling of disgust that one can have in the Baba Antropofágica experience and even the refractory aspect to the touch that the Bichos can contain. Although the invitation to play is part of the seduction inherent to the practice, the experience can lead to another direction.

The experiments carried out by Clark at the Sorbonne were important, as the place functioned as a laboratory for his research. There was a certain regularity that is typical of therapeutic works, but there was also, in an evident approximation to Freud, the question of dream interpretation. As an example, in this sense, the proposition Baba Antropofágica, generated from the strange dream already described. We also previously highlighted the importance of the moment of speech after the activity developed. This is also a characteristic point of therapeutic practices. And she had a particular, more organic way of referring to speech, as "vomit", a physical, bodily expulsion of what is in the bowels, in the core of the subject. As can be seen, the subsequent action in the most therapeutic sense is already based on this phase.

It is with Relational Objects that your practice becomes more therapeutic; its poetic

guideline remains however. The openness to experience and reflective remembrance of what was lived in the original sense persists in his program, because, as Heidegger said so well: "Presence always brings with it its pre-sense".⁹ In this sense, Clark develops his practices, based on the idea that the body brings the memory of what has been lived. It is therefore important in practice with relational objects to provoke the subject's fantasy. The senses are established in dealing with the body and according to the affective load of the subject, his passions and traumas. The intention is to provoke the body's memory from weight, size, texture, temperature, rhythm and movement relationships.¹⁰ To try to somehow effectively touch the "psychotic core of the subject".¹¹ The aim is then to restructure the subject, of a self that is fragmented, not integrated into the world.

The experiences with Relational Objects aim to stimulate perception, to bring to the now a long-forgotten imagery and experiential residual. The body keeps the memory of pain, as it appropriates the sensory experiences lived, which are symbolized by the subject. Clark's effort, then, in the Caminhando experience, is to make the subject review the symbolic traumas, recover the lost unity, that continuity with the outer space that he once glimpsed. It is in this dynamic of reversion to the lost naturalness that psychic decompensations emerge.

This work with Relational Objects acquires a more determined therapeutic system based on the idea of structuring the Self. In fact, Clark advances this experimental proposal, reports progress in

7. MESQUITA, Tiago. A dor do corpo. In: FIOCHI, Marco Aurélio; SCOVINO, Felipe; DUARTE, Paulo Sergio (Org.). **Lygia Clark: uma retrospectiva**. São Paulo: [s.n.], 2015. (Catálogo de exposição). p. 65.

8. The same.

9. HEIDEGGER, Martin. **Ser e tempo**. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2001. v. 1, p. 187.

10. CLARK, op. cit., p. 49.

11. The same, p. 50.

his practice and creates methods, such as genitalization and verticalization, to bring clients in a regressive state back to normal. Although this more determined approach to therapeutic practice is evident, as we have seen, his poetic foundations insist. In this regard, Paulo Sérgio Duarte tells us: “I never believed in the purely therapeutic process of those final works; I always saw them as a concomitant survival of the poetic work in a radical experimentation...”¹². In fact, she does not abandon her organically inclined poetics and remains interested in reversing the process of split between man and nature. What is important then is this primordial dimension, the experience of an original experience alien to fixed intuitions. Even in regressive practices, the aim is to make the subject appropriate his archaic experiences to bring them back to his presence. Finally, a certain cosmological nostalgia is evidenced as the meaning of his poetics, which deals with the vices, conventions and conditionings that culture delimits.

12. DUARTE, Paulo Sergio. O estilo tardio de Lygia Clark. In: FIOCHI, Marco Aurélio; SCOVINO, Felipe; DUARTE, Paulo Sergio (Org.). **Lygia Clark: uma retrospectiva**. São Paulo: [s.n.], 2015. (Catálogo de exposição). p. 43.

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