

ESCAPING ART'S BOUNDARIES WITH LYGIA CLARK'S MOMA RETROSPECTIVE

Wendy Vogel, *Blouin Artinfo*, 23 June 2014



An installation view of *The House is the Body* (1968), part of the exhibition *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art, 1948-1988* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York (May 10–August 24, 2014).
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Forget the readymade: anything can be art. It needn't even be a *thing*. Ephemeral documentation, written instructions, and even telepathic events are all accepted under the tautology that art is willed into existence by its creator's intention, given value by our markets, hallowed by our cultural institutions. Under these Duchampian conditions, utter withdrawal remains art's last romantic fantasy. Yet only a few works have managed to escape art's boundaries and stay relevant to its discourse – Bas Jan Ader's *In Search of the Miraculous*, his fatal round-the-world boat trip in 1975; Lee Lozano's eviscerating *General Strike Piece* score, which mandated that she gradually retreat from the art world in 1969. "The Abandonment of Art," the title of Lygia Clark's first North American retrospective, currently on view the Museum of Modern Art, claims the Brazilian artist within this radical lineage of refusal. No doubt her late works fit this definition. The sticker question is methodological: how to frame object abandonment, or at the very last ambivalence, in the very museum that defined modernist formalism?

The short answer is through reinforcing a kind of modernist formalism. Sociopolitical exegesis is relegated to the excellent catalogue; the show's focus remains on objects – over 300 works made from 1948 to 1988, when the artist died at age 67. It begins with paintings Clark made in her hometown of Belo Horizonte, where she studied with the modernist architect Roberto Burle Marx. The earliest canvas, a figurative rendering of a spiral stair from 1948, bears a



Lygia Clark in her studio, Rio de Janeiro, c. 1950. Courtesy Associação Cultural "O Mundo de Lygia Clark," Rio de Janeiro

resemblance in muddy palette and subject matter (sans figure) to Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2*, 1912. Other works from the period include architectural maquettes and jazzy geometric abstractions that riff on Mondrian. In the mid-1950s she alighted on the concept of the "organic line" as a fracture of space. The notion enters her work as a compositional technique in the Suprematist-influenced "Quebra da moldura" ("Breaking the frame") series, extending painted motifs past the picture plane to the frame itself. The puzzle-like "Planos em superfície moldulada" ("Planes in modulated surface") works of the last years of the '50s, all wood pieces fitted together, anticipate her move to monochrome painting and her next phase of sculpture.

Clark's alliance with Neo-Concretism, a Brazilian avant-garde movement that saw artwork as a "projection of the body," nudged her into participatory object making. The "Bichos" ("Creatures") of 1960, stunning tactile sculptures in metals

ALISON JACQUES

like anodized aluminium, transform the “organic lines” of her abstract paintings into movable hinges. Typically housed in vitrines, here the “Bichos” sit grouped in clusters on plywood pedestals. A limited number of exhibition copies have been created for viewers to manipulate with their hands, as Clark intended. The gleaming curlicue “Trepantes” (“Climbers”), metal sculptures that sometimes wrapped around tree trunks, presage her groundbreaking *Caminhando* (“Walking”) piece of 1963, an instruction work to cut a Möbius strip of paper ever smaller.

The final phase of Clark’s work, her sensorial objects made mostly in Paris in the ‘60s and ‘70s, are by far her most radical. Starting with *Caminhando*, the artist divested traditional notions of authorship as she became more invested in experimental therapies and psychoanalysis. In 1976 she would retreat from the art world to pursue therapy, though she returned to an engagement with art toward the end of her life. This research-driven phase of production spanned her “sensorial masks” of 1967 – containing pockets of different materials, such as spices, to engage different senses – to communal exercises involving image-fracturing goggles or instructions to gather under elastic nets. She called this practice “body nostalgia,” isolating and “mutilating” specific body parts as a sort of surrealistic antidote to the sensory-deadening effects of capitalist culture. The relics of it – bodysuits, books, sculptural props – tacked to the walls as a seeming afterthought pale in comparison to projections from Eduardo Clark’s 1973 film *The World of Lygia Clark*, narrated by the artist herself. In an effort to put a contemporary relational aesthetics spin on the show, the museum invites visitors to participate in guided exercises in the antiseptic gallery space at appointed times – a far cry from Clark’s documented experiments in nature. More effective (though less visible) may be workshops relegated to the Education Building next door hosted by renowned social-practice artists like Allison Smith.

In the end, “The Abandonment of Art,” which runs through August 10, is an admirable and serious look at Clark’s slippery practice. What it fails to address in the even-more-difficult question of shifting intentions and objecthood in the art-into-life debate. When anything can be art, how can an exhibition critically address what the artist says is not art? This show suggests that abandonment is still only a fantasy, that art and its institutions can always pull artist back from the edge.