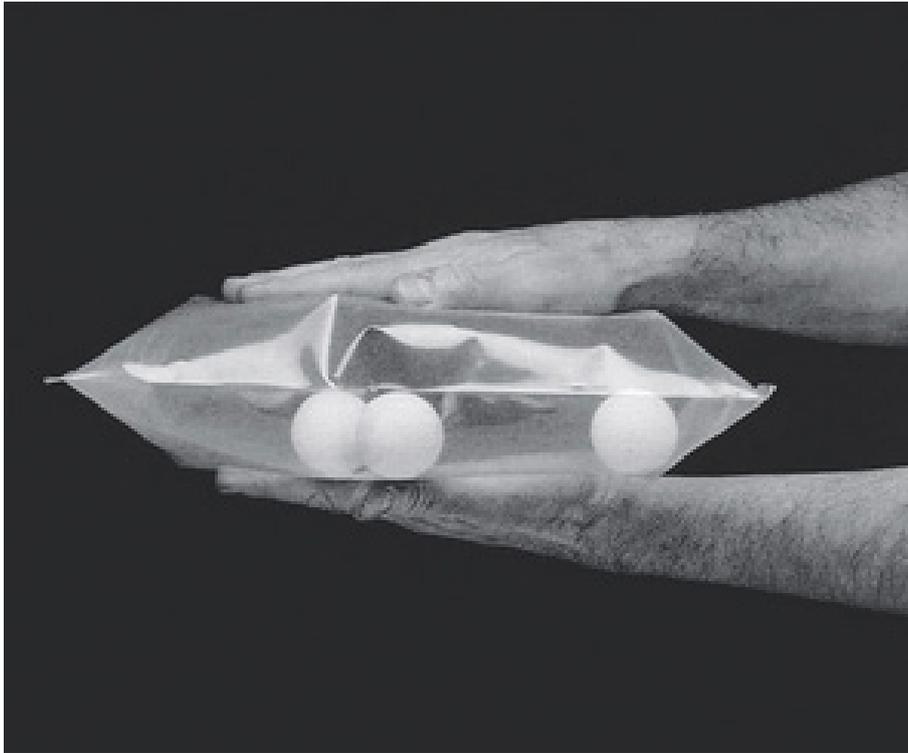


## LYGIA CLARK: THE ABANDONMENT OF ART, 1948-1988

Valery Oisteanu, *The Brooklyn Rail*, 5 June 2014



Lygia Clark, "Clark's proposition Ping-pong (1966) in use." Ping-Pong balls and a plastic bag. Courtesy of the cultural association "O Mundo de Lygia Clark," Rio de Janeiro.

This is Lygia Clark's first comprehensive exhibition in North America, comprised of nearly 300 works including drawings, paintings, and sculptures spanning a 40-year period. Curated by Luis Pérez-Oramas and Cornelia Butler, and assisted by Geanine Gutierrez-Guimarães and Beatriz Rabelo Olivetti, the show is an overdue homage to a multidisciplinary artist and "medicine-woman"—a renaissance figure who experimented with conceptual, wearable body art, healing techniques, and interactive conversations with the spectator.

Lygia Clark (1920 – 88) was a radical innovator, a mid-20th-century Neo-Constructivist, Neo-Concretist, and participant in the Tropicália art movement. Authenticity was her priority. As a Brazilian, she began her art studies in Rio de Janeiro and then moved to Paris in 1950 to study with Fernand Léger. She became part of the Forward Group, formed in 1953, and signed the 1959 Neo-Concretist Manifesto, consistently fostering the active participation of spectators in her work. Her influences can be traced to Paul Klee, Kurt Schwitters, Kazimir Malevich, Theo van Doesburg, and Piet Mondrian.

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The survey is organized around three key themes: abstraction, Neo-Concretism and, as the exhibition's title states, the "abandonment of art." Just before the entrance into MoMA's sixth-floor galleries, the visitor is met by Clark's words silkscreened above the door: "The Plane Is the Thickness of Space" (1960). According to the curator Pérez-Oramas, this assertion is the driving force behind Clark's artistic investigation. For Clark, all objects exist as densities, leading to her ultimate conclusion that art is an act happening among, with, and between bodies. The three works installed in the upper atrium serve to reiterate this credo: a giant photo entitled "Máscara abismo com tapas-olhos (Abyssal mask with eye-patch)" (1968) shows Clark wearing an eye-patch, her face covered in several layers of plastic; a sculpture, "Trepante, versão 1 (Climber, version 1)" (1965), made of two stumps of wood connected by a shiny metal spiral; and "O Mundo de Lygia Clark (The World of Lygia Clark)" (1973), a video clip directed by Eduardo Clark of Clark squeezing various plastic bags. Together, these pieces act as an intriguing preamble for what lies within, and what lies within is extraordinary.

Clark's earliest attempt to communicate movement and time was through painting staircases, spiral ones at first, such as "Escada" (1948 - 51), and then later, realistically linear stairs, as seen in "Interior" (1951). Here, design implies movement. Her trajectory of development quickly moved to producing abstract geometric compositions and later minimalistic oil paintings that extended organically onto the frame. Clark finally settled into the practice of a form of "art-psychotherapy," creating a "language of the body" comprised of masks, gloves, and full-body costumes meant to be worn and lived in by the viewer. Through these items, the participant touches different objects such as ping-pong balls in a plastic bag in an innovative attempt to promote inner healing.

One of the glass displays is devoted to "Estruturas de Caixas de Fosforos" (1964), a collection of small works assembled from matchboxes that have been painted black, red, blue, white, or beige. The boxes are glued together, some of them open and connecting with others in a game of modular negative-positive space. This architectural project, which Clark called the "metaphysics of the boxes," is activated by a surreal contrast in scale and physicality. Clark's other spatial geometric sculptures—made from cardboard, wood, and aluminum alloy—resemble the Bauhaus style of László Moholy-Nagy, presenting a biologically active design ethos that experiments with silence and meditation. Earlier in her career, Clark constructed wooden maquettes emphasizing open spaces, as in "Maquete de casa (Maquette for the house)" (1955), or rooms with transparent ceiling, like "Costrue você mesmo o seu espaço de viver (Build your own living space)" (1960), shown here.

Clark was an architect trapped in an artist's body; her "Bichos" ("critters" in Portuguese slang), for example, are geometric shapes that can be endlessly reconfigured into vaguely delineated creatures. One such critter is a triangle-shaped metal monster titled "Arquitetura Fantástica (Fantastic Architecture)" (1963); another, titled "Relógio de Sol (Sundial)" (1960), is made of aluminum squares and semicircles with gold patina. Regardless of the fact that Clark never

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ceased to think of architecture, including titling one of her landmark circular Bichos “Poetic Shelter” (1960), she also conceived of the possibility of making some of them at a civic scale, as with the gigantic public sculpture depicted in the catalogue’s essay “Ceci N’est Pas Un Mur: The Architecture of Organic Lines” by Zeuler R.M. de A. Lima.

In another gallery, replicas of Clark’s first interactive objects await visitors on jute-covered tables. Most of these works are made of flat triangular, square, or circular metal sections attached to each other by hinges and balanced to stand upright. These articulated concrete structures can be endlessly reconfigured by the viewer who is encouraged to do so by the facilitators in the gallery. By participating, the viewers become co-conspirators with the artist.

After a car accident that injured her wrists, Clark developed osteoarthritis in her hands and began research into art as physical therapy. This eventually manifested itself in performances in which the artist placed members of her audience on a huge custom-created mattress, where assistants then placed small bags filled with stones, marbles, and shells upon their prostrate bodies. From the late 1960s through the 1970s, Clark created a series of unconventional artworks in parallel to a lengthy psychoanalytic therapy, leading her to develop a series of therapeutic propositions grounded in art. She writes:

One day I found myself reusing one of these plastic bags, filling it with air; on the outside on one of its angles, I put a pebble. When I took the bag in both hands and slowly squeezed, the stone came out and went into the bag edge. I felt a delicious sensation in my hands. I felt my body through the touch of my hands on the plastic bag. After that I was much more erotic.<sup>1</sup>

At MoMA, museumgoers are invited to play with these bags, transferring water and shells from one to the other, feeling the sensation of their own bodies reacting to the process. “I filled other bags with air and stones, or with water, marbles, and stones,” Clark once wrote. “We apprehend them with touch, and I continue to think that this is the art for the blind. Actually it is no longer art, but a simple proposition to feel the body.”<sup>2</sup> The viewer is also invited to improvise sculptural, geometrical assemblages and to change the configuration of elaborate, interlocking mazes created by modular pieces. Clark felt that such collaboration was a healing process for viewers, one that brought out their latent creative instincts and helped them to better understand her creative process.

In the fourth-floor gallery, MoMA has reproduced Clark’s 1969 installation, “A Casa é o Corpo. Penetração, Ovulação, Germinação, Expulsão (The House Is

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<sup>1</sup> Writings by L.C., 1968-mid 1980s, accompanying MoMA catalogue, pg. 242

<sup>2</sup> Writings by L.C., mid-1980s, MoMA’s catalogue, 2014

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the Body: Penetration, Ovulation, Germination, Expulsion)” which concretized many of the artist’s concerns about a “libidinal economy.” Viewers are invited to navigate through a setting of five small rooms that artistically imitate the human reproductive system. The first of these rooms is packed with white air balloons, creating a claustrophobic space from which one emerges into a corridor leading to an entrance with layers of plastic. Then, viewers are corralled into a transparent plastic amniotic sac, exiting back into the corridor that subsequently leads through a “birth canal” room lined with distorted mirrors. In the final closet-like room, colored balls cover the floor and multicolored yarn hangs from the ceiling, all of which must be navigated before the viewer passes through a slit into daylight. Clark described this installation as a locus of female fecundity, a sensorial and immersive environment that leaves participants as “born again.”

In the final section of this exhibit, facilitators distribute seven large, surreal colored masks resembling nonexistent animals for “Máscara Sensorial (Sensorial Masks)” (1967). Nearby, a circle of 10 guests create a giant spider web out of interlocking rubber bands stretched across their hands and feet, creating new patterns as they weave among each other. By participating in this piece, I realized that the most fascinating side of Clark’s art is the experience of so-called “non-artistic” activity. Human interaction becomes art via ready-made props, masks, costumes, special glasses, and visors, all in the name of therapy. Clark’s message of “the abandonment of art” was revolutionary, and she meant it—this abandonment of production of “commodified art objects” for a consumerist society under a military junta. In 1977, Clark withdrew from her artistic circles, choosing instead to concentrate on her therapeutic practice called “Estruturação do Self (Structuring the Self)” and receiving clients at her home in Copacabana, Rio.

Never dull for a moment, Clark’s shamanistic and ritualistic approach to healing manifested itself as an art without art, ritual without myth. On the one hand, she leaves us with a personal and collective sensorial experience of rejuvenation, and on the other, with an original approach to therapy. This twofold legacy makes Clark present inside her concepts long after her passing, a unique form of immortality as the unquiet ghost of her own retrospective.