**Nostalgia of the body**

Testing the sensorial in recent contemporary art

*Nostalgia of the Body* presents new work by Maria Ezcurra, Carla Guagliardi and Priscilla Monge. The exhibition was conceived as an homage to the subtle, but undeniable, influence of the ideas of leading Brazilian artist Lygia Clark (1920-1988) in the work of many contemporary artists from Latin America. Clark developed a unique practice centred on providing opportunities for participation of the individual in the work of art, downgrading the status of art objects and privileging experience; all still paramount concerns of current art practice.

Lygia Clark’s oeuvre underwent a radical evolution from the neo-concrete paintings and reliefs she made in the 1950s, to the more sensory work of the 1960s and 1970s, which towards the end of the decade culminated in the ground breaking concept of turning art into experimental psychotherapy. This process produced one of the biggest leaps in the philosophical appraisal of art. It converted the act of passive reception into an experience of active involvement, to the extent of using those experiences as tools for healing. Clark’s group investigations began while teaching at La Sorbonne in Paris and consisted of perceptual exercises assisted by the use of what she called relational objects. These *objetos relacionais* were basic tools made of organic and simple domestic materials such as plastic bags, shells, scents and stones to produce helmets, garments, and hand-held devices intended to enhance the participant’s empowerment through unique sensorial experiences. Ideas of empowerment of the audience were well underway in Latin America in the 1960s as a consequence of an established, highly politicized current of Conceptualism. Artist Luis Camnitzer explains:

...*Conceptualist art in Latin America seemed to be concerned with (more) profound travesties (...) Art here was meant to be a way to allow the audience to participate in a decision making process that hopefully would lead to social and economical liberation. Didactic approaches therefore were rather welcomed than despised.*

*The acceptance of didactics, however, didn’t mean that one had to embrace the traditional simplistic transmission of a political message. This traditional form of transmission, typical of the old pedagogy, is classified as indoctrination. Instead, the new aim now was not to brainwash, but to equip people with creative tools.*

*Nostalgia of the Body* leaps from this past to the present. In her work, Carla Guagliardi matches apparently diverse materials such as water and plastic, iron, glass, copper and air, steel, cotton and plants in order to reveal/demonstrate the action of time and gravity upon matter and space. In her pieces, the artist employs time and chance as decisive agents, insofar as the works are never complete but made by the stimulus of those forces. Her ‘artistic act’ is to propose, to initiate rather than create. The process she is inducing through the various material associations takes on and ‘makes’ the work, free from the hands and control of the artist. It is precisely in this detachment, and in a persistent but highly

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1 The expression *Nostalgia do corpo* was coined by Lygia Clark to refer to a series of experiments created at the end of the 1960s to induce awareness of the body and the rediscovery of the sensorial through manipulation of ordinary objects.

metaphorical presence of the body - its fluids and internal workings - that we can associate Guagliardi’s methodology with the groundbreaking investigations of Lygia Clark.

*Untitled*, a work donated to the University of Essex Collection of Latin American Art on the occasion of the exhibition *Continuum* in 1995, consists of a line of 180 x 15 cm plastic bags sealed at the top end, containing iron rods and each filled with water. The work, imbued with a minimal aesthetic, undergoes a mutation with the passing of time; the rust produced by the contact of water and iron creates an ever-changing hue of oxidized clouds in each of the bags and an ever-growing layer of deposit at the bottom. In this piece, Guagliardi induces an exchange of matter with neighboring elements; subject to time and gravity, this produces a change in appearance.

The work conceived for firstsite *O lugar que eu respiro / The site that I breathe* is a sculptural installation comprising a gracious structure of connected copper pipes, each pipe supporting an inflated balloon. While balloons bring to mind festivities and childhood, they also reference lungs and the vital process of breathing. The internal organs are replaced here by the rubber objects which sustain themselves through air circulating through the pipes; a breathing process happening in the ‘body’ of the installation.

Maria Ezcurra employs garments to create highly complex installations and wall-based pieces which examine the relationship between the individual body and society at large; linking subjectivity with the information contained in common objects, she unveils cultural and social dynamics. Our awareness of the world is filtered by appearance; the perception of a person is often highly determined by the way in which he or she chooses to wear garments, and by extension, the location of the individual within systems of classification such as gender, class and economic power, that is related to those choices. By displacing the quotidian object - the tie, the swimsuit, the shoe, the pantyhose or the sweater - from their utilitarian function new associations are suggested. Ezcurra performs a transformation which opens up questions about our dependency, highlighting the almost absurd relationship we create with our own image and that of others.

The child of Argentine exiles, Maria Ezcurra moved to Mexico City at the age of five. While in London studying an MA at the Chelsea School of Art, she made a public intervention on Tate Britain’s iron railings - inserting sixty-seven woollen gloves on each railing. In a recent series of interventions on the streets of Mexico City, *Asiento / Seat*, the hard edged and impersonal nature of public space is also transformed by the addition of domestic signifiers; cosy, delicately patterned cushions were tied to tree trunks turning them into improvised benches.

In *Invisible* made for this exhibition, she spreads out hundreds of pairs of tights in the space of the gallery to create a maze-like structure that cloaks the viewers with messages of intimacy. If her sculptural and installation pieces summon minimalist strategies of accumulation and seriality, the resulting imagery speaks far beyond the formal dictum, recalling the subject’s body through the texture of textiles that live in close proximity to skin. A phrase by Lygia Clark comes to mind when inhabiting Maria Ezcurra’s installations: *I use clothes to denude the body.*

Enacting the hidden side of morality and challenging good manners with elegance, Priscilla Monge turns materials into vehicles that poignantly transgress gender associations and reveal the wounds

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3 Clark Lygia, letter to Guy Brett, Rio de Janeiro, undated (1968)
and cracks behind which women have hidden for centuries. Through the employment of mostly ordinary materials linked to the female world such as sanitary towels, soap, make up and music boxes, she appropriates feminist art strategies from the perspective of her own time and location. In view of feminist discourses becoming somehow ‘outdated’ in Western society, it is important to remind ourselves that the symbolic power of certain objects – like sanitary towels - as well as assumptions of empowerment and liberation, are not indisputably one dimensional, but subject to location, history and social conditions. In contemporary Uganda, for instance, more than a half of the girls who drop out of school in upper primary classes do so because of lack of separate toilet facilities and easy access to water sources within the schools. Monge’s Pantalón/Trouser (1996) consisted of a pair of trousers made of sanitary pads and worn by the artist on the streets of San José during her menstruation. Her performance brought out to the streets the hidden taboo – the ‘dirty’ side of femininity. It was the same female blood that most feminist activists before her had celebrated in order to challenge the place denied to women in the society.

At first site, Monge converts the building’s eighteenth century salon into a football pitch that has been distorted to rise and fall like a crumpled tablecloth. The game is altered. The goals are painted on the wall, making the penetration of the ball – the main objective of the game - an impossibility. The curves and mounds of the pitch - perhaps evocative of the mountain landscapes of her native Costa Rica - pervert the ethos of the masculine world and force the players to surrender to a new set of rules that are all but clear. Priscilla Monge has already visited the heavily charged world of football imagery in a recent series of conceptually based photographs, and in her piece Soccer ball (1998) made of sanitary towels and black leather. These works explode gender assumptions by infiltrating signifiers of the feminine and the private at the heart of a singularly masculine and public visual universe.

The works in Nostalgia of the Body are inhabited by the same spirit of experimentation and self-exploration found in Clark’s working methods. Furthermore, they invite us to navigate them with a sense of adventure. Their material qualities are intrinsically associated with the everyday, and their formal makeup with what Merleau-Ponty would call a ‘permanent condition of experience, a constituent of the perceptual openness to the world’, recalling the body either by scale, interactivity or association.

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4 Kanyike, Florence, Uganda’s coordinator of the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE). She argues that menstruation is the main cause of school absenteeism and poor academic performance among schoolgirls.