NEW YORK

Lygia Clark

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Lygia Clark *Oculos*, 1968. Goggles made of industrial rubber, metal, and glass, 11½ x 7 x 3 in., seen in a still from Eduardo Clark's 1973 film *The World of Lygia Clark*.

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 notion 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. 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 attempt to cross the Atlantic in a small sailboat 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, claims the Brazilian artist within this radical lineage of refusal. No doubt her late works fit this definition. The stickier question is methodological: How to frame object abandonment, or at the very least, 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—more than 300 works made between 1948 and 1988, when the artist died at age 67. It begins with paintings Clark made in her hometown of Belo Horizonte, where she studied with modernist architect Roberto Burle Marx. These include architectural maquettes and geometric abstractions that riff on Mondrian. In the mid 1950s she developed 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 modulada" (Planes in modulated surface) of the late '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, tactile sculptures in metals like anodized aluminum, 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, a score to cut an ever smaller Möbius paper strip.

Her sensorial objects made chiefly in Paris in the '60s and '70s are by far the most radical. Starting with *Caminhando*, the artist divested traditional notions of authorship as she pursued psychoanalysis and experimental therapy in her work. In 1976 she broke with the art world to become a therapist, though she returned to making exhibitions at the end of her life. This psychologically research-driven phase of production spanned from her "sensorial masks" of 1967—containing pockets of materials over different orifices, such as spices over the nose, to engage different senses—to communal exercises involving image-fracturing goggles or gatherings under elastic nets. She called this practice "body nostalgia," isolating and "mutilating" specific body parts as a surrealistic antidote to the sensory-deadening effects of capitalist culture. The relics of these endeavors—bodysuits, books, sculptural props—tacked to the walls as a seeming afterthought pale in comparison to projected clips from Eduardo Clark's 1973 film *The World of Lygia Clark*, perhaps because these things were on the verge of becoming part of an anti-aesthetic therapeutic practice.

In an effort to put a contemporary relational aesthetics spin on the show, the museum invites visitors to participate in guided exercises using Clark's objects in the galleries at appointed times—a far cry from her documented experiments in nature. More effective (though less visible) may be workshops relegated to the Education & Research Building next door, like mask-making with the renowned social-practice artist Allison Smith.

This retrospective seriously addresses Clark's objects. What it fails to address is the even more difficult question of shifting intention 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 artists back from the edge. **—Wendy Vogel**

EDUARDO CLARK AND WORLD OF LYGIA CLARK CULTURAL ASSOCIATION