

ART'S HISTORIES WITHOUT ART HISTORY

KAIRA MARIE CABAÑAS

The year 2020 marked the one-hundred-year celebration of the birth of artist Lygia Clark, an anniversary that was commemorated in her native Brazil with panel discussions, exhibitions, and a theatrical presentation, some canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic.¹ Clark—along with Amílcar de Castro, Ferreira Gullar, Reynaldo Jardim, Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Pape, Theon Spanúdis, and Frank Weissman—formed part of the country's short-lived Neo-Concrete movement (1959–61), which has gained increasing attention from English-language scholars in the last decade.² The Neo-Concrete artists reoriented the space of geometric abstraction, of Concrete Art, toward a spatialized phenomenological experience, one in

-
- 1 The centennial events included Gina Ferreira and Lula Wanderley, "Lygia Clark: Corpo memória—Celebrando 100 anos de Lygia Clark," a virtual conversation organized by the collective Antropofagias Contemporâneas: Saberes do corpo nas espirais do tempo, October 29, 2020, and *Lygia*, a theatrical monologue created using Clark's diary entries, presented as part of an exhibition curated by Felipe Scovino at OM.art Studio in Rio de Janeiro, September–October 2019.
 - 2 English-language scholarly volumes that discuss the Concrete and Neo-Concrete movements include Sérgio B. Martins, *Constructing an Avant-Garde: Art in Brazil, 1949–1979* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013); Pedro Erber, *Breaching the Frame: The Rise of Contemporary Art in Brazil and Japan* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015); Mónica Amor, *Theories of the Nonobject: Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, 1944–1969* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); Irene Small, *Hélio Oiticica: Folding the Frame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); and Alexander Alberro, *Abstraction in Reverse: The Reconfigured Spectator in Mid-Twentieth-Century Latin American Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

which the viewing subject was accorded a more active role. But Clark was the only one among them for whom therapeutic practice became the actual material of her art. She developed her artistic practice by moving from the act to the body, then moving from the body to the relation between bodies, and finally engaging with subjectivity itself, with the development of her *Estruturação do self* (*Structuration of the Self*) sessions and use of what she called *Objetos relacionais* (*Relational Objects*), which she placed on the body of her clients.³ As therapy, the *Estruturação do self* continues to this day in the work of her trusted disciples Gina Ferreira and Lula Wanderley, whose texts—combinations of clinical case study and political/poetic intervention—I have the honor to introduce here.

For the 1984 documentary *Memória do corpo* (*Memory of the Body*), Mário Carneiro filmed Clark explaining the individual *Objetos relacionais* and rehearsing her therapeutic process with the art historian Paulo Sérgio Duarte, who agreed to play the role of the client.⁴ As Clark displays the *objetos* one by one, she identifies how they combine disparate qualities, such as hard and soft, natural and industrial. For example, her plastic “pillows” might be filled with air, water, or sand; some pillows are designated as “light,” “light-heavy,” and “heavy,” made with cotton cloth and filled with varying quantities of either polystyrene balls or sand so as to produce various pressures when placed on the body. The *Objetos relacionais* also include natural objects such as large and small seashells, as well as a small stone wrapped in a soft net. *Respire comigo* (*Breathe with Me*, 1966), which dates to the period of her sensorial work, consists of the accordion tubing commonly used in diving equipment, mobilized by Clark in the therapeutic setting because of its materiality and hollow cylindrical form, which she highlights in the film by blowing through it. Because of differences in densities, textures, and sounds, each object produces different sensations—from the acoustic murmur of shells placed next to one’s ears to the light pressure of air blown on one’s body through the rubber tube.⁵

3 For accounts of Clark’s late work, see, for example, Suely Rolnik, “Politics of Flexible Subjectivity: The Event Work of Lygia Clark,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 97–112; and Susan Best, *Visualizing Feeling: Affect and the Feminine Avant-Garde* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 47–66. See also *Lygia Clark: De l’œuvre à l’événement* (Nantes, France: Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes, 2005), exhibition catalog.

4 Mário Carneiro, director, *Memória do corpo* (1984), video, 30 min.

5 This text in part draws from observations published in chapter 4, “Art without Art,” of my book *Immanent Vitalities: Meaning and Materiality in Modern and Contemporary Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021).



Mário Carneiro. *Memória do corpo*, 1984. Rehearsal of Lygia Clark's *Estruturação do self* (*Therapy Session*). Video, color, sound. 30 minutes. Screen captures.

Between Clark's explanation of the *Objetos relacionais* and her demonstration of the therapy, the film includes an approximately 3.5-minute interval in which Ferreira and Wanderley are introduced, though Ferreira remains silent and in the background throughout the sequence. Wanderley explains how Ferreira and he met at the institute Casa das Palmeiras, married, and worked together exploring "expressive techniques" for therapeutic use.⁶ Both also underwent therapy with Clark. Wanderley notes that his own experience under Clark's care led him to research and explore its potential use with clients experiencing psychosis and, especially, schizophrenia.

Ferreira's and Wanderley's work is superbly complementary. Ferreira is a social psychologist who uses the arts—for instance, photography and film—for the socialization and treatment of psychiatric patients. She also maintains a private clinical practice dedicated to the *Estruturação do self*. Wanderley is an artist who brings creativity into the realm of psychiatric care, developing what he calls "hybrid zones" that actively blur the categories of art and non-art, the clinical and nonclinical. Where Clark primarily worked with the middle class and cultural elite in her individual *Estruturação do self* sessions (she counted musician Caetano Veloso among her clients), Ferreira and Wanderley have significantly expanded the sites and amplified the applications of Clark's sensorial and therapeutic propositions by working in public psychiatric hospitals and clinics in Rio de Janeiro and with marginalized populations whose psychiatric diagnoses often converge with race, class, and gender discrimination. Key here is the fact that their practices also extend the entwined genealogy of psychiatry and art that lies at the heart of Brazilian modernism, a subject I explore in full in my book *Learning from Madness*.⁷

One of the origins of this entwined genealogy can be traced to 1946, when psychiatrist Nise da Silveira, in collaboration with the painter Almir Mavignier, opened a painting studio for her patients at the Centro Psiquiátrico Nacional Pedro II (commonly known as

6 In 1956, decades before Brazilian law mandated the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, Silveira cofounded the Casa das Palmeiras, an open rehabilitation institute that continues to use expressive activities in an outpatient manner. The clients (patients) who frequent the Casa das Palmeiras realize expressive work, which is signed, dated, and archived for further study.

7 Kaira M. Cabañas, *Learning from Madness: Brazilian Modernism and Global Contemporary Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

Engenho de Dentro) in Rio de Janeiro. That studio is still active today.⁸ In the mid-to-late 1940s, the exhibitions of her patients' work drew sufficient critical attention that leading Brazilian art critic Mário Pedrosa included the work of psychiatric patients in his defense of a universal aesthetics of reception and "common configurative impulse."⁹ Despite the fact that both Clark (the artist) and Silveira (the psychiatrist) befriended and collaborated with Pedrosa, Clark and Silveira never met each other. Nevertheless, these two women would become vital points of reference for understanding the experimental context of Ferreira's and Wanderley's dedication to how artistic practices can be harnessed for use in psychiatric treatment.¹⁰

Clark's knowledge of psychiatry extended to the art produced by Silveira's patients. (Silveira preferred the term *clients*, a naming practice maintained by Ferreira and Wanderley.) When writing to Oiticica from Paris in October 1970, Clark noted, "I'm tired of closed people; I'd much rather be in a place like Engenho de Dentro . . . where someone like Emygdio expressed himself or someone like Raphael eats pencils and shit, but what a wonderful character, and what he expresses is magisterial!"¹¹ (Emygdio and Raphael are two of Engenho de Dentro's best-known patient-artists.) Yet only after returning to Rio in 1976 did Clark begin to adapt her sensorial propositions for individual treatment. Of her *Estruturação do self*, Clark continually insisted, "I do not theorize, because I know nothing, and it gives a great result."¹² Although she did not craft theories, certain of her writings about the *Objetos relacionais* and her clients' experiences are important for understanding this work, just as the present translations of Ferreira's and Wanderley's texts offer essential firsthand accounts. Available here for the first time in English,

8 On Silveira's work, see the comprehensive volume by Luiz Carlos Mello, *Nise da Silveira: Caminhos de uma psiquiatra rebelde* (Rio de Janeiro: Automatica, 2014). In May 1952, Silveira founded the Museu do Imagens do Inconsciente, which, under Mello's committed direction, remains dedicated to the preservation of the patients' work.

9 See my "Una voluntad de configuración: El arte virgem," in Mário Pedrosa: *De la naturaleza afectiva de la forma* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2017), published in English as "Toward a Common Configurative Impulse," in "Arte abstrata no Brasil: Novas perspectivas," ed. Ana Magalhães and Adele Nelson, special issue, *MODOS: Revista de história da arte* 5, no. 1 (2021).

10 Ferreira and Wanderley, "Lygia Clark."

11 Lygia Clark to Hélio Oiticica, October 22, 1970, reproduced in *Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica: Cartas 1964–1974*, ed. Luciano Figueiredo (Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ, 1996), 182.

12 Lygia Clark, "Eu, Lygia Clark," typescript, n.d., archive of "The World of Lygia Clark" Cultural Association, Rio de Janeiro.

they are essential resources for tracing the consequential afterlives of Clark's therapy.

With "Lend Me Your Eyes," Ferreira offers a poetic account of both Clark's practice and how communication became a "'therapeutic' possibility" for the artist. These thoughts frame Ferreira's narration of her clinical care of a client named Pedro. As Ferreira's text unfolds, readers learn about Pedro's delusions and how they intersected with his participation in the Afro-Brazilian religious practices of Candomblé. Readers slowly grasp how Ferreira's careful mediations with Pedro's family and with the Candomblé community are married to her remarkably supple and nuanced (and thus nondogmatic) response to his psychosis. Ferreira engages Pedro in the *Estruturação do self* but ultimately uses photographic montage to reconstruct Pedro's image of his body and his relationship with it. Her final musings on Clark's desire to become "another body" provide an ideal transition to Wanderley's text.

In "The Silence That Words Hold," Wanderley describes how Silveira prompted his artistic engagement with psychiatric practice, paving the way for his exposure to Clark and her *Estruturação do self*. He then introduces Rosa, whose treatment included electroshock therapy before she became his client at Espaço Aberto ao Tempo (Space Open to Time), a transdisciplinary space Wanderley created in 1988 as part of his search for a new ethics of working with individuals experiencing acute psychic suffering.¹³ Wanderley describes Rosa as catatonic, immobile, and mostly silent, though not exactly mute. He identifies her behavior as "only gaze." With the use of *Objetos relacionais*, Rosa slowly expanded her verbal communication with those around her. Wanderley concludes by addressing the ethics of therapeutic encounter and the limits of reductive treatments premised on efficiency.

Ferreira's and Wanderley's texts put in relief the modes of therapeutic communication—both verbal and nonverbal—that they developed to allow for the complexity of their clients' experiences to be more fully understood.¹⁴ These two case studies compellingly attest to how

13 Espaço Aberto ao Tempo is located on the grounds of the Instituto Municipal Nise da Silveira (formerly the Centro Psiquiátrico Nacional Pedro II) in the neighborhood of Engenho de Dentro.

14 A glance back to the late 1930s and 1940s, the height of psychiatry's anatomical-pathological phase in Brazil, is sufficient to assess how patient files traditionally reflected medicine's diagnostic drive and its prescriptive dictates for treatment: from lobotomy to electroconvulsive shock therapy. Patients' personal histories remained obscure and confined to the psychiatric archive, present only through reductive summaries in their medical records.

Clark's *Estruturação do self* resonates beyond the institutionalized spaces of the museum and the academy. Accordingly, these accounts constitute an urgent intervention in art history and in the assimilationist drive of contemporary global art studies, which continue to insist that Clark's work be inscribed within paradigms antithetical to it—whether these be “relational aesthetics,” “participation,” or “performance art.”¹⁵

Clark once explained that “one must deinstitutionalize both the body and every concrete relation.”¹⁶ So, too, with Ferreira and Wanderley, whose work has further inspired my own efforts to “deinstitutionalize” art-historical research. Their work presents a conjunction of concerns that reverberate within and recalibrate the institutional space and practices not only of psychiatry but of art history—after all, an art historian wrote this text. What such shifts mean for the realm of professional artistic practice is likely what Clark was referring to in 1983 when she wrote that an artist is content “to achieve the singular state of art without art.”¹⁷ I interpret this in light of how her work left behind art's institutional exhibition spaces even as she continued to practice art. With my own “retirement” from art history, I have set out to write “art's histories without art history,” a practice that inspires the title of this preface to two texts by two dedicated mental health professionals and the particular constellation their work entails: art and therapy, which together imply an aesthetics but also an ethics of care.¹⁸

15 Clark rejected any approximation of her work to “body art” or performance. See Yve-Alain Bois, introduction to Lygia Clark, “Nostalgia of the Body,” *October* 69 (Summer 1994): 87–88.

16 Lygia Clark, untitled, in *Lygia Clark*, ed. Manuel Borja-Villel and Nuria Enguita (Barcelona: Fundación Antoni Tàpies, 1998), exhibition catalog, 301. Clark's use of the term *deinstitutionalize* is also historically specific. The years when Clark began working with individual clients were a time when the media began to denounce the horrors of the psychiatric institution and when the *reforma psiquiátrica* gained momentum in Brazil, leading to nationwide changes in the mental health care system that coincided with the final years of the military regime.

17 Lygia Clark, “On the Magic of the Object,” in *Lygia Clark* (1998), 154.

18 On September 19, 2020, I turned to my life partner and said, “I am retiring from art history. I don't know what that will mean in practice.” On September 28, I confirmed the statement to graduate students in seminar: “I retired from art history on September 19.” I archly observed how, unlike Marcel Duchamp, who “retired” from art in 1932, I do not play chess. I extemporaneously read from telegraphic notes about how we seem to be living in a moment in which art does not matter. Art is being asked to do other things, to answer preformulated questions with ready-made answers. When that art is “global modern” (my so-called field), it is subjected to the imposition, in imperialist fashion, of categories and theories that respond to the West. Thus, I am ill at ease with an increasingly visible performative contradiction: scholars declare a decolonial *intention* but *impose* Western art-historical practice on the “foreign” object, thus replicating the “monolingualism of the global” that

TRANSLATION NOTE

I am grateful to Fernanda Pitta for her insights on aspects of the present translations, as well as to Christopher Davey for making the texts more idiomatic for English readers. Original emphases are maintained, with any alterations noted. Whenever possible, I have standardized the titles of Lygia Clark's work and their translations to correspond with the exhibition catalog *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art* (Museum of Modern Art, 2014). The one exception is the translation of *Estruturação do self*: In this instance I prefer to translate *estruturação* as the noun *structuration* (defined as the state or process of organization in a structured form), rather than as the gerund/present participle *structuring*, which would be more akin to the adjective *estruturante*. Readers may also notice that individuals are sometimes referred to using only their first name. In the case of psychiatric patients/clients, this occurs in part due to clinical practices intended to preserve partial anonymity in publications. In the case of cultural figures, it is due to the Brazilian practice of referring to them on a first-name basis, as when “Lygia” is used instead of “Clark.”

In Gina Ferreira's text, I translated her original use of *vivência* as “experience.” *Vivência* is the fact of living, experience of life, and is etymologically related to *viver* (to live). *Experiência*, also translated as “experience” in English, relates to *vivência* but often also refers to learning through practice, as in work experience. Gina's use of *vivência* is key, as the word resonates with the lived experience of Clark's works. Finally, Gina Ferreira's unpublished Portuguese-language “*Empresta-me seus olhos*” (Lend Me Your Eyes) was presented as a lecture in the context of “The Legacy of Lygia Clark's Structuring of the Self,” an event I co-organized with Sergio Delgado Moya at Harvard University on April 10, 2017. Lula Wanderley's text was previously published in Portuguese. The original title is also shared by a book and the chapter on which it is based. See Lula Wanderley, *No silêncio que as palavras guardam: O sofrimento psíquico, o Objeto Relacional de Lygia Clark e as paixões do corpo*, ed. Kaira M. Cabañas (São Paulo: n1 edições, 2021), ch. 7.

I have critiqued elsewhere (see *Learning from Madness* chapter 6). For me, art is by necessity a way of inserting a pause, or nuance, and is a model of thinking *with* the other and thus thinking *other* to oneself (one's adopted language, one's learned theories) in order to challenge what one thinks one knows, especially when one speaks from the privileged spaces of the American academy. I continue to openly practice my retirement from the institutionalized expectations of the discipline.