

# LYGIA CLARK

## THE ABANDONMENT OF ART

### 1948–1988

Lygia Clark (Brazilian, 1920–1988) was among the most daring artists of the second half of the twentieth century. This exhibition encompasses her entire career: her modernist paintings and drawings of the late 1940s and '50s; her sculptural works of the early 1960s, often made of metal, which elaborate upon forms and themes from the earlier paintings; and her radical “relational propositions” of the 1960s and '70s—works that erase the distinction between artist and audience by calling for active participation, for users rather than viewers. From the mid-1970s on, Clark ceased to call herself an artist and concentrated on developing psychotherapeutic uses for these objects.

Clark’s early work was heavily influenced by modernist geometric abstraction and by the Brazilian Concrete art of the 1950s. From this art of graphic lines and smooth-edged shapes, however, she quickly developed completely new forms and practices centered on the hinges, folds, and spaces between surfaces and objects. This led her to an interest in the relationship between the art object and the human body, and to an art in which objects are not the aesthetic focus but instead serve as occasions for collective experiences of wholeness, synthesis, and fluidity. In 1977, feeling that she had reached the limits of what could be expressed through art, Clark began a chapter of her career in which she applied her so-called sensorial objects directly to the bodies of participants in her therapeutic practice in order to generate profound interpersonal experiences.

Clark’s highly original ideas about the links between art and social life have had a powerful influence on the art of the last fifty years. Throughout her career, she was fascinated by paradoxical forms and concepts that she described by such terms as “empty-full,” “inside-outside,” and “mute thought.” Her work marks a frontier between art and non-art, between art and therapy, between aesthetic contemplation and self-analytical immersion. Her legacy remains fresh and challenging in its proposal that by abandoning the production of art objects as the ultimate goal of art, both art and the self can be conceived anew.



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The exhibition continues on the fourth floor with the installation *A casa é o corpo: penetração, ovulação, germinação, expulsão* (The house is the body: penetration, ovulation, germination, expulsion, 1968).

The exhibition is organized by Luis Pérez-Oramas, The Estrellita Brodsky Curator of Latin American Art, The Museum of Modern Art; and Connie Butler, Chief Curator, Hammer Museum; with Geanine Gutierrez-Guimarães, Curatorial Assistant, and Beatriz Rabelo Olivetti, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Drawings and Prints, The Museum of Modern Art.

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# EARLY WORKS

Lygia Clark began making art in the late 1940s, while living in Rio de Janeiro. During this period, she trained under the architect Roberto Burle Marx, who was influenced by both Cubism and the organic forms of indigenous Brazilian art. Marx would become one of the most significant landscape architects of his time, and his designs for public spaces and parks are emblematic of Brazilian modernism.

Clark's early work was informed by her interest in architecture. Her paintings of the late 1940s depict interiors of buildings and intricately structured staircases, and the influence of such forms is evident in her more abstract compositions of the early 1950s. Some of the latter feature opaque, colorful planes juxtaposed with white, veiled, seemingly transparent forms, creating a prismatic effect. These works stress the flexibility of boundaries between inner and outer space—a recurrent theme in her career—anticipating sculptural works in which inside and outside are fused.

# BREAKING THE FRAME

In the mid-1950s, in a series of paintings she called *Quebra da moldura* (Breaking the frame), Clark began to leave the conventions of modernist painting behind by making the frames essential elements of her works. She expanded their width, attached them to the paintings, and extended the compositions onto them. Most significantly, she left gaps between the frames and the paintings—a crucial innovation that would influence her subsequent work in ways both overt and subtle. In 1957, she wrote in her journal that her intent in using these frames was to open the paintings up, thereby allowing “the participation of external space in the internal composition of a surface.”

# DISCOVERY OF THE ORGANIC LINE

In 1956, Clark gave a lecture at the Escola Nacional de Arquitetura (National School of Architecture) in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. Reviewing her work to date, she described the steps by which she had produced her paintings of 1956–57, focusing particularly on the series *Superfícies moduladas* (Modulated surfaces). These works feature a complex system of juxtaposed planes separated by very small gaps—the only “lines” in the compositions—that Clark called *linhas orgânicas* (organic lines).

In the Belo Horizonte lecture, Clark drew comparisons between painting and architecture, equating her organic lines with such things as doors, windows, and floors. Particularly significant among her works of this period are architectural models featuring forms similar to those in her paintings. Describing her main objective at the time, Clark wrote, “What I seek is to compose a space and not compose in it.” Lines floating between planes like creases or voids within the painting—as in *Descoberta da linha orgânica* (Discovery of the organic line) and in later series such as *Planos em superfícies moduladas* (Planes in modulated surfaces) and *Espaços modulados* (Modulated spaces)—would be a central motif in Clark’s work of the 1950s and beyond.



# MODULATED SURFACES

The first group of *Superfícies moduladas* (Modulated surfaces) developed from the series *Quebra da moldura* (Breaking the frame). These compositions, which feature abstract geometric patterns created by the juxtaposition of colored planes, take two distinct forms: orthogonal compositions where what Clark called “organic lines”—the thin gaps between the planes—are stressed by contrasting colors and, conversely, dynamic oblique or triangular compositions where the organic line unfolds in vibrant shapes. These works mark the end of a phase of adventurous experimentation with color; Clark’s subsequent paintings would be limited, with few exceptions, to black and white.

Also from this period are the *Planos em superfícies moduladas* (Planes in modulated surfaces), monochromatic paintings featuring complex, iterative arrangements of simple geometric shapes. In these compositions, Clark sought to create harmony between orthogonal and oblique forms. One can see the organic lines as both isolating the planes and connecting them into a functioning whole, almost like a machine—an active assemblage of parts, each of them potentially independent. By producing the illusion of volume, density, and depth among these vibrating planes, Clark was able to demonstrate her assertion that “the plane is the thickness of space.”

# NEO-CONCRETISM

Clark's aesthetic and philosophical concerns during much of the 1950s coincided with those of Neo-Concretism, a Brazilian artistic movement that rejected the impersonal and objective quality of so-called Concrete abstraction (which sought to rid abstract art of all references to external objects). The Neo-Concretists conceived of their works as existing between art and life, as occasions for experiences in the public realm. Two key concepts in the Neo-Concretist Manifesto were crucial for Clark: the idea that a work of art is a projection of the body and the notion that art should arouse a kind of perception that is more than the sum of individual stimuli. Clark's Neo-Concretist repertoire includes numerous series of studies and paintings, mostly restrained to black and white, in which the "organic line"—a thin gap between fields of color—opens the composition towards the exhibition space.

Although Clark's engagement with the Neo-Concretist movement was extremely brief, her participation with the group and the many relationships she established with its central figures (notably the Brazilian art critic Mario Pedrosa and the artist Hélio Oiticica) left a long-lasting mark on her work. Neo-Concretism ultimately provided Clark with the foundations of an investigation into a more collective form of artistic interaction, leading her toward a full engagement with the public.



# BICHOS

Around 1960, Clark found a way to elaborate the topological themes of her Neo-Concretist paintings in an assertively three-dimensional form. The result was the series of sculptures known as *Bichos* (Critters), the first of Clark's works meant to be manipulated by the viewer. She developed numerous types within this series—her largest—often producing each one in several sizes and giving them names that suggest symbolic content, such as *Sundial*, *Fantastic Architecture*, *Pan-Cubism*, and *Monument for All Situations*. The ideas developed in the *Bichos* would radically transform Clark's subsequent work.

In the *Bichos*, the “organic lines” of her paintings (the gaps between planes of color or between picture and frame) become hinges between panels, allowing the sculpture to be transformed from schematic flatness into a variety of unexpected three-dimensional configurations. They have no unique, predetermined shapes: spectators were meant to manipulate them and explore their possible arrangements. In 1960, Clark wrote, “The arrangement of metal plates determines the positions of the *Bicho*, which at first glance seems unlimited. When asked how many moves a *Bicho* can make, I reply, ‘I don't know, you don't know, but it knows.’”

# THE WORK IS THE ACT

In 1963, Clark made one of her most important works, *Caminhando* (Walking), by twisting a strip of paper 180 degrees, gluing its ends together to create a surface with one continuous side (known as a Möbius strip), and cutting around and around its length until it was too thin to be cut further. The Möbius strip, a shape where outside and inside fuse, suggesting the illusoriness of spatial boundaries, would be a frequent motif in Clark's later work.

Importantly, *Caminhando* is the first of Clark's works that people are invited to take part in creating, thus becoming more than simply spectators. The essence of such "propositions," as Clark called them, is not an object made by the artist and experienced passively, but the viewer's interaction with the object—or as she put it, "the work is the act." Anyone can make a *Caminhando* by following the same steps as Clark. "You and it will form a reality that will be unique, total, existential," she wrote, "No separation between subject–object. It is a body-to-body affair, a fusion. The different responses will come out of your choice." This logic of participation and interaction between the beholder and the object would continue to evolve in later works such as *Obras moles* (Soft works) and *Trepantes* (Climbers).



# SENSORIAL AND RELATIONAL WORKS

Clark spent much of the 1960s and 1970s in Europe, especially Paris. During this time, she made very simple objects out of ordinary things such as gloves, plastic bags, stones, seashells, water, elastic, and fabric. These “sensorial objects” were designed to make possible a different awareness of our bodies, our perceptual capabilities, and our mental and physical constraints.

Clark’s first sensorial object, *Pedra e ar* (Stone and air), derived from the experience of breaking her wrist in 1966. She took a plastic bag that had been used to immobilize the wrist, filled it with air, put a stone on top of it, and pressed it against her body, “thus mimicking,” she said, “an extremely disturbing birth.” The sensorial objects, all based on everyday items, were meant to be activated by contact and coordination with the body and its functions. By matching one’s gestures with these simple objects and thus making them, in a sense, part of the body, one would, Clark thought, be able to find a deeper connection to one’s own body. Most sensorial objects impart a fragmented experience, stressing one body part or sense over the wholeness of the body. Clark believed that this would allow us to reach a new and total awareness of our own corporeal existence.

# NOSTALGIA FOR THE BODY

Clark's late work focused on the idea that we are always missing something in our bodily experience—a memory, a moment, a desire—and that we can experience these feelings through an imagined body, an experience beyond words and embracing all the senses. In the early 1970s, while undergoing psychoanalysis and teaching at the Sorbonne, she conceived a series of propositions that—in contrast to the solitude intrinsic to the earlier uses of her sensorial and relational objects—involved larger groups of participants in a quest for a collective body. These collective propositions led her to abandon art and focus on her work's therapeutic potential.

The more Clark realized her destiny outside the art world, the more resistance she encountered in the worlds of both art and psychotherapy. Her work was an abyss, an absence pointing to open, unresolved questions in both disciplines. It was, as she said, “non-art within art.”

Clark returned to Rio de Janeiro in 1976 and devoted the rest of her life to therapy, using her entire repertoire of sensorial and relational propositions in a final, radical quest that she called “the structuring of the self.”



*A casa é o corpo: penetração, ovulação, germinação, expulsão* (The house is the body: Penetration, ovulation, germination, expulsion) is an installation Clark conceived for the 1968 Venice Biennale. As the title implies, she intended to create a fully immersive corporeal experience akin to birth.

The structure is made of sheets of plywood separated by a large bubble of plastic suspended from the ceiling above, so that the visitor moves through a series of sensations. On entering, one finds a dark room with a soft landing; then follows “ovulation,” a compartment filled with a variety of soft, spherical materials (balloons, balls of rubber, and Styrofoam); next is “germination,” an open, transparent space in the shape of a teardrop; finally, in “expulsion,” one exits through fine threads, or “hairs,” and sees oneself in a deforming mirror.

The philosophical and psychoanalytic concept known as “anamnesis”—the recollection of buried or repressed memories, often from a supposed time before consciousness—played a key role in Clark’s work. In 1971, she wrote, “I discovered that the body is the house . . . and that the more we become aware of it the more we rediscover the body as an unfolding totality.”

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