On the Trail of Lygia Clark

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Rolnik, Suely. *Lygia Clark : « Archive pour une œuvre-événement »*, Paris : Carta Blanca : Centre national des arts plastiques, 2010

- 1 The black box, with its slightly enigmatic title, seems to put the object governing its existence at a remove—the oeuvre of the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark (1920-1988). But there is less editorial awkwardness here than signs of a conception of the archive championed by the author: the remove of the evidence is the space of a relationship to be constructed or “activated”, a sort of “void” or “incompleteness” to be crossed. Otherwise put, the work is not in the box. Nor, incidentally, is it in the objects left by the artist, or in the images, or in museum stacks, although all these agencies indicate the work’s possible activation zones, in their own way, at differing degrees of organic vibration. What we have in our hand is just a “ramification”. This takes on its full meaning in its link with other developments, such as the exhibition of the work, its inclusion in museum collections, and the exhibition of the archive itself. As a “fourth ramification”, the ten DVDs published here give access to twenty long interviews conducted by Suely Rolnik with friends of Lygia Clark and connoisseurs of her work, artists, musicians, film-makers, choreographers, writers, art critics, psychotherapists, militants and former students. They themselves represent just a sampling of 65 interviews, a huge systematic recording endeavour involving a living memory, embarked upon in the early 2000s, whose material led in particular, in 2005, to a retrospective show at the Museum of Fine Arts in Nantes. The issues raised by this work add to the tension that permeates the artist’s 40-year career: how are we to find life at the heart of an art aiming at the creation of an essential form, when, under the effect of successive cleansing operations, this art tends towards a metaphysical abstraction disconnected from the unusual and collective bodies where all process of aesthetic and political transformation is played out, as was blatantly evident in the 1960s? Where the

archive is concerned, how is the historical form of the solution proposed by L. Clark to the first question to be brought into the picture, *a fortiori* when this answer consisted in practical forms which the artist's absence risks stripping of meaning? The major difficulty stems in fact from a significant turning-point made by the artist in the early 1960s. As a major figure of Brazilian neo-Concretism, alongside Helio Oiticaca, L. Clark elected at that particular time to radically open up the geometric form of her painting and sculpture to the immanence of transformations dependent upon viewers, their presence, and their capacity of manipulation.

- 2 In extending the "Organic Line", the "Destruction of the Frame" and her famous *Bichos* (literally, "beasts", kinds of articulated metal casserole dishes), in 1963 the artist came up with *Caminhando*, which consisted in getting the viewer to make a paper Moebius strip, and inviting him or her to enter it through a point with the help of scissors, and then cut it lengthwise, for as long as it was possible to avoid the point of departure of the cut. This path, with neither inside nor outside, following a potentially infinite process which involves the other's body, is revealed in the end-like L. Clark's own career—as a journey with no way back.
- 3 Between 1962 and her death in 1988, the artist was involved in a radical experimental path which, for a long time, remained in the shadow of her neo-Concretist period, and is still little known about today. Moving from sculpture to the conception of "relational objects", from 1972 on, during her exile in Paris, she managed to undertake a project around the "collective body" which would be incarnated during workshops organized at the Centre Saint-Charles at the Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University. Back in Brazil, in 1976, she started work on a project called *The Structuration of the Self*. Still on the sidelines of the art world, her approach was intended as therapeutic, and led L. Clark, not without a tense dialogue with psychoanalysis, to experiment with the role of relational objects on the bodies of her "clients" playing, as S. Rolnik explains, on the sensory, unconscious, representationless memory. This latter phase especially interests the author through the questions she asks the interviewees. Coming from psychoanalytical research, S. Rolnik worked with L. Clark in the 1970s. This was the strangest period, which is the hardest to situate in the artist's life, and her most solitary one. Her paradoxical hypothesis, underpinned by several of the interviews, is that this last point imbues the whole œuvre with its meaning. We cannot here go into the detail of the accumulated twenty or so hours of interviews, with, it would seem, an editing task often reduced to a minimum, letting the silences of recollection ring out, and at times anecdotal details unfold, along with apparently personal narratives, outside the subject, by ending up effectively describing a context and an unusual figure which is brought to the fore.
- 4 Along a France-Brazil axis rolled up as a Moebius strip, let us dissect these interviews by heading in part for the place where the voices intersect; this, furthermore, is a way of activating the memory by getting away from the linearity of the filmed interview. So we listen to Caetano Veloso singing as he describes the *Structuration of the Self* sessions; we hear Jards Macalé (a musician) mourning his "aesthetic mother"; Ivanilda Santos Leme (a prostitute), remembering that she was suspicious of L. Clark, whom she took for a gangster; Rubens Gerchman (artist) having fun talking about the crazy project which apparently consisted in producing millions of *Bichos*; Suzana de Moraes (a filmmaker) describing the ferocity of dictatorship and the dreams of the counter-culture. We often hear words about the powerful woman, the "bomb" that she was in Brazil in

the 1950s, of her passion for men and the link between her work and Brazilian idiosyncrasy. Of the place played in her work by touch, or, as Hubert Godard puts it, “sub-cortical perception”. Lula Wanderley, a therapist, explains at this point how he liberated a psychotic person by putting him in contact with L. Clark’s relational objects. But Thierry Davila, Yve-Alain Bois and Guy Brett all emphasize the fact that L. Clark never stopped being an artist. So it would be nice to hear the voice of the psychoanalyst Pierre Fedida—sadly missing from the selected interviews—explaining that L. Clark “constructs a space for the word with the body”, whereas psychoanalysis produces the opposite. A debate is thus triggered between, on the one hand, Ferreira Gullar, a theoretician of neo-Concretism, who lambasts the irrevocable sensory art, with neither language nor thought, of the artist’s final period, and, on the other, Paulo Herkenhoff, an art historian, asserting on the contrary that L. Clark is “the artist of the latter half of the 20th century, the creator who investigates space at the deepest level, and in the richest possible way.”