

ART IN THE PLURAL

Guy Brett

“It is not the object in itself which is important, but the way it is lived by the spectator.” [1]

“Emphasising the action of the subject which circulates and not the objects among which he circulates.” [2]

The first phrase has been used in the discussion of Lygia Clark's, Lygia Pape's and Hélio Oiticica's work. And the second has been used in connection with that of Ricardo Basbaum. I believe the similarity between them is important. It proposes a connection between generations, not in order to establish a pious, master-disciple or innovator-follower, relationship between them but to highlight what is at stake in these apparently simple phrases.

The powerful Clark-Pape-Oiticica legacy has operated on younger artists principally in two ways, I believe. One has been to take their innovations at a formal level, in other words to extract only the surface appearance and novel materiality of their works and use it for the production of objects (or environments, installations) that return their practice to artistic categories they had decisively broken with (for example, to return to the autonomous, expressive, authored 'sculpture'). To put it severely, one can only view this as a kind of betrayal, even though the intentions may have been good, and the results may win plaudits in the art world. The other alternative is to take their innovations as a stimulus for the further development of the relationships they proposed, interpreting this in ways which may bear little resemblance to their work on an external level. Ricardo Basbaum has been among these latter artists. Avoiding any superficial formal mimicry, he has taken up the Clark/Pape/Oiticica proposal for a participatory, emancipatory understanding of art. In other words he has gone beyond the autonomous art object, and the sterile pursuit of 'art as art as art', art that merely inquires into the nature of art, or demonstrates contextual or cultural issues, to seek ways in which art can interact with life, with people, and set in motion processes of change.

These value judgments may seem excessively stringent, given the formal beauty, economy and sensuality of the objects Clark/Pape/Oiticica have made. It is not to belittle this formal beauty, nor to dogmatically or programatically condemn 'autonomous' works (although, even here, one looks for works that may be interpreted as 'models', works that "move thought forward", to borrow a phrase of Fontana's, rather than aesthetic 'sweets'). Rather, it simply

recognises that something extremely precious was established by these artists, a new notion of communication, a new functioning of the object in mediating the exchange between artist and public (itself an instance of the primordial relationship you-me), the overcoming of a certain form of alienation and finality, and the opening up of a field of possibility. Lygia Clark proposed the Relational Object, an object without an expressive or autonomous identity, or material rarity, which takes on its meaning only in the course of the spectator's participatory act: a position just as radical today as when she first adopted it.

Times, however, do change. I have always been interested in the way Ricardo Basbaum has attempted to reinterpret the concepts of Clark/Pape/Oiticica, to rediscover their efficacy in the conditions of today, something he has done both in his art and his writing. One of the most attractive aspects of his position has been its open and non-exclusive nature. He has given as much attention to other artists' work as to his own, interpreting the radical Brazilian legacy as a set of principles, or generative seeds, operating in a number of artist's practices in different ways, in a developing sense which can always be taken further.

In the 1960s Lygia Clark could speak, without appearing mad, of artists joining in an attempt to "release the general creativity of everyone, without any psychological or social limits". [3] It seemed possible that revolutionary social change could combine with cultural emancipation. And it seemed possible that such an emancipation could coincide with the dream embodied in abstraction, constructivism, neo-plasticism, suprematism, neo-concretism, of clearing away and starting afresh, or at least of bringing together ancient, primordial relationships with those of the future. More recently, such kinds of concerns have been much affected by a critical consciousness, which has investigated the social-cultural processes of the production of meaning. If artists had pursued notions of energy, cosmos, space-time, in the spirit of a *tabula rasa*, more recently artists have presented such a search as enmeshed in culture, as inescapably mediated, as charged with a multitude of subjectivities.

Rather than polarising these two positions, however, we might take a broader and longer-term social view and say that both have been expressions in the field of micro-politics, 'civilizational' strategies, emancipatory, poetic, therapeutic, critical drives, enacted through intimate, person-to-person relationships. The strategies of those without access to power.

Basbaum's on-going NBP project bears the marks of a micro-political artistic endeavour which takes a position of ironic subversion towards the operations of global corporate power and the information age. It counterposes the rituals of the art gallery with those of everyday life. The adoption of the acronym and the pseudo-corporate or organisational emblem as a sort of camouflage seems to have a two-way effect. On one hand it masks something intimate, inter-personal, emotional and poetic with the impersonal aura of business and management, and on the other it mocks the individual, unique art work by its blank and unpromising appearance, which is nevertheless offered as a vehicle for creative imagination.

“A ‘conceptual motto’ for transformation”, is how Basbaum describes the emblem of NBP (apparently, in origin, a stylisation of the eye as a plane with a hole in it). It might appear as a solid monolith occupying a space, but functioning unlike a traditional sculptural modulator of space, rather as a reminder of a change of consciousness. Or it might be mass produced and given away to people as a sort of container to put in their houses and to be used as they wished (Basbaum later documented photographically these various adaptations). The idea is that the artist intervenes and starts a process which spreads out “inch by inch”. In general the strategy welcomes flux and indeterminacy, a de-conditioning of habit. There is, perhaps, a further irony in the way the orderly and cerebral ‘concept’ is offered up to the messiness of life. Human relationships within an environment are furthered explored in a series of diagrammatic drawings which are part map, part force-field, part musical score.

If Basbaum’s is a micro-political strategy, it must be marked or inspired to some extent by the necessity of survival in the hostile or indifferent conditions of the macro-politics of our society, or it must negotiate a space for itself vis-a-vis the powers that be. In a very interesting essay, the artist Maria Moreira has aligned work such as Basbaum’s with a particular cultural tradition operating within Brazilian society, a tradition which she traces back to the necessity of survival of Afro-Brazilians “in the situation of near-extirpation created by slavery”. [4] Moreira suggests that this “certain Brazilianess” has now become widely disseminated in the population as a whole and surfaces in Basbaum’s work as “a cultural injunction, a force independent of the artist’s conscious intentions.”

This Afro-Brazilian tradition has been called “Repersonalisation”, a term appearing to chime with Basbaum’s “New Bases for Personality”. According to Maria Moreira, “Repersonalisation is a stratagem for conviviality”. “Initially developed”, she writes, “as a ‘slave survival strategy’ it is disseminated after the end of slavery as a ‘subsistence strategy of the oppressed’ [5] exercised, in the search for social insertion, by the new group of the excluded generated in the process of liberation. Repersonalisation is based on the cultural attitude of establishing zones of contagion, where code mixing occurs around secret nuclei, where the different between one culture and another is renourished.”

It is worth quoting Moreria’s analysis further. “According to Roger Bastide” [6], she goes on, “Afro-Brazilian thought is guided by two principles: the principle of participation, through which all existing things are ordered by affiliation to arbitrated forces: the orixás; and the principle of scission which, regulating the former one, prevents the passage of items from one roster of relationship (or connection) to another. The two principles guide perception in the recognition of ‘similarities by efficiency’, as when entities, even while belonging to different explanations of the world, are ruled by analogous arbitrated forces”. This interpretation contradicts the accepted idea of the existence of syncretism in Brazilian culture because, crucially, “the principle of scission ... does not lead to conversion, to elimination, or assimilation of one item

by another". A fluid situation is created where "each remains operant in the specificity of its explanatory schema of the world".

Moreira adds a sentence which, I believe, eloquently links the tradition she has been describing with the aspirations of a significant number of artists today, for "an ease in assuming, tranquilly, the variety inherent to the world, taming it through the subtlety of contextualisations", and aiming for "a specific sort of awareness of variety, as multiplicity without counter-position."

Of course, Maria Moreira is careful to distinguish such a cultural specificity from the rhetoric of nationalism. In fact it is an example of how a so-called 'Brazilianness' can become supra-national and widely applicable at the present time. Other examples of such "fluidity of transfer between logical blocks" not only constitute the groupings of Brazilian artists which Basbaum has participated in and encouraged, but can be extended to artists internationally, whether or not the 'art world' recognises the phenomenon. For example, a loose group of Italian artists, based in the Veneto, near Venice, describe the situation they feel they work in as follows:

"Body and consciousness have changed. We can no longer recognise ourselves in a particular culture, whether it be scientific, artistic, religious or otherwise; neither can we identify ourselves in a specific ethnic group, be it African, Asiatic, European, etc; nor can we exist as single individuals. We cannot even be a human species. We are now inseparably united to automobiles, galaxies, leopards, satellites, trees ... a widened body, a universal organism, a mixture of combustible oil, blood, gas, sap ... This 'new' nature inevitably forces us, and the other entities, to behave with reciprocal consideration, and it is this very behaviour which attests to the awareness of and willingness to interact with a plural entity." [7]

It is fascinating to me that this can be compared directly with some explorations taking place in the group around Ricardo Basbaum. For example, of Eduardo Coimbra's work we read that he seeks, "to bring together in a single apprehension the animal and machine natures of things and spaces, mathematical structures and organic movements, combining pure imagery and tactile objects to propose new lived experiences of space-time", and that he seeks "a hybrid state of coexistence between ... two polarities." [8]

'Hybrid' is also the term Basbaum uses for the new entity formed when a person wears, manipulates, animates, the Relational Object of Lygia Clark or the Parangolé cape of Hélio Oiticica: "formed at the same time by the addition body + art object, biological tissues + manufactured/industrial materials. As if you had a tool in your hands, as an extension of your body, but in order to work on yourself." With Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, Basbaum says, "the pattern : YOU the spectator / ME the artist" is "sensorially reversed ... into the conceptual flux: YOUwillbecoME". [9]

NBP x You-Me is of course the title of Basbaum's new work presented here. The I and the You: Clothing-Body-Clothing was the title of a work by Lygia Clark of 1967: two hooded suits incorporating a blindfold, for a man and a woman communicating by touch, to discover metaphorical indications of their own gender in the clothes of the other. In 1968 Lygia Pape constructed her Divisor, the vast cotton sheet pierced with equidistant holes for people's heads, a contradictory experience of either, or both, 'community' and 'social atomisation'. In 1969 Hélio Oiticica fabricated his series of Nests and Barracão, leisure nuclei, the paradoxical mix of solitude and sociability. Fusion/confrontation, bipolarity and merging, fluidity of transfer between logical blocks. In his new work Basbaum devises a number of leisure-capsules for a couple to lie down in, to introduce inflections in the conditions of proximity, of being together and apart.

And so the story continues ...

Notes:

1. Rosangela da Costa Motta, quoted by Guy Brett in "The Logic of the Web", Lygia Pape, São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 2000 (forthcoming).
2. Maria Moreira, "Rigour/Resonance", 1992. Published at *item.4 afro-américas*, Rio de Janeiro, 2002.
3. Lygia Clark, "L'Homme, structure vivant d'une architecture biologique et cellulaire", 1969, Robho (Paris), no 5-6, p.12.
4. These and subsequent quotations are from Maria Moreira's two essays on Ricardo Basbaum, "Rigour/Resonance" and "Art as Confrontation: A Field Diary", 1997. Published at *item.4 afro-américas*, Rio de Janeiro, 2002.
5. Roberto Moura, *Tia Ciata e a Pequena Africa no Rio de Janeiro*, Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 1983, p110. Muniz Sodré: *O Terreiro e a Cidade: A forma social negro-brasileira*, Petrópolis: Vozes, 1988, p165.
6. Roger Bastide, *Sociologia*, Org. Maria Isaura Pereira Quieroz, São Paulo: Atica, 1983, p208.
7. Danilo Balestro, Pierluigi Cazzavillan, Giovanni Morbin, *Etica Espressiva Universale (EEU)*, broadsheet, Vicenza, 1994.
8. *Project - Five Brazilian Artists* (João Modé, Ricardo Basbaum, Eduardo Coimbra, Raul Mourão, Brígida Baltar). Agora, Rio de Janeiro, 2000.
9. Ricardo Basbaum, "Clark & Oiticica", Blast 4: Bioinformatica, New York, December 1994.