

Border Crossings Magazine, Canada, May 2021, Stephen Horne



"Language is not life; it gives orders.
Life does not speak; it listens and waits."
—Deleuze and Guattari,
A Thousand Plateaus

Most of us are acquainted with the procedures involved in moving a household. There is the simple practical and bodily side of selecting, putting things into containers, carrying stuff from here to there, but there is the more all-encompassing task of organizing the bits and pieces. It's like a mini-military operation in favour of order against chaos, remembering that chaos was in ancient times the name for the void, the source, nature.

Born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1960, just a few years prior to a long period of dictatorship, Fernanda Gomes makes the case for intimacy and vulnerability, for art's release from the demand that it be immediately important or offer solutions. Her exhibitions are counter heroic and seem to propose, instead, a voluntary poverty. Her art is a haptic practice of interweaving space, time and commonplace objects in which she proposes that there is already an empathy, albeit suppressed, in our dealings with things as well as with space, persons and other sentient beings.

In Brazil, Gomes's generation of artists succeeded the movement known as Neo-Concretism, which could perhaps have been better named Anti-Concretism, opposed as it was to the rationalism and other rigidities of Concretism. In any case,

Installation view, "Fernanda Gomes,"
2019, Pinacoteca do estado de São
Paulo. Courtesy Galeria Luisa Strina.
Photo: Pat Kilgore.

Neo-Concretism featured a manifesto written in 1959 by theorist Ferreira Gullar, concerned with one of painting's material/perceptual issues, that of the plane, the plane being what represses the human sense of wholeness. Deconstructing the picture plane as a medium of expression allows for an awareness of unity as an organic living whole. Following the phenomenology of French philosophers Henri Bergson and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the neo-concretists proposed an understanding of art as neither a machine nor a thing taken objectively but, instead, as living organisms.

This notion of a living organism supersedes its expansion in science as the "Gaia Hypothesis" from the 1970s, but it shares a similar spirit and resides in a challenge to the concept of a progress without limit. The much-esteemed theorist of technology and its politic, Langdon Winner, wrote in his essay "Three Paradoxes" (*Culture on the Brink*, Bay Press), "The idea of progress is still firmly implanted in the collective consciousness of Western industrial societies." The decades of the '60s and '70s were also a time of backlash against the romanticism of expressivity in art and the understanding of art as an organicist practice. There were, however, significant exceptions to the structuralist bullying of the time: on the continent the movements of Fluxus and Arte Povera, and in North America the post-minimalism of Eva Hesse, Richard Tuttle, Bruce Nauman. This moment was well expressed in Robert Morris's marvellous essay "The Phenomenology of Making." In Latin America the organicism of the early '60s included, among others, Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, Mira Schendel and Anna Maria Maiolino, four artists whom North American audiences caught up with in the '90s. Simultaneously in that moment three younger Brazilian artists arrived on what was becoming the "International" scene: José Leonilson, Ernesto Neto and Fernanda Gomes. While not practitioners of Neo-Concretism, they were artists who did share its belief in the life-affirming capacity of aesthetic experience and process orientation, while northern artists remained caught in the web of textism and deconstruction.

Fernanda Gomes's actions engage in a process that is preparatory, an opening to aesthetic experience, for which art arrives "after," the artist being merely an arranger of conditions, a preparator even, setting up the stage. Gomes is not a maker, but her process is that of configuring, perhaps on the model of the Japanese art known as ikebana, or "way of flowers," a practice drawn from Buddhist meditation. What is at issue here in the contrast between a maker and an arranger is the practice of power, especially where the frame appears. This is crucial to the questions Gomes's work poses with

regard to practices of containment and organization. Recognizing these as procedures oriented by the frame of linear progress toward a predestined conclusion, how may we approach the paradox of art that poses an aim but where the aim is incompleteness itself? Hannah Arendt described this space for art in *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press) as a space "where no beginning and no end exist and where all natural things swing in changeless, deathless repetition."

Entering an exhibition of Fernanda Gomes's work is to enter a field where you are pulled in two directions—on one side a disorderly chaos, and on the other a precise geometric aesthetic, with the two intermingling in playful elegance. Such a focus on assembling and placement poses a tension that invites us to consider abstractly the collection of things as a composition. Here, we have a room filled with familiar objects such as chairs, tables, shelving units, diverse frames and other furnishings, repositioned but as reminders of their previous functioning to order space and make room for occupation. However, in another room, there appears to be nothing, just a few sheets of flat building materials in a casual overlap against a wall. A certain anxiety emerges in the face of such emphasis on the two-dimensional plane.

Gomes's work belongs to painting through her consistent invocation of the principal painting conventions: the rectangular frame, a coherent surface, some paint and colour. White in this case becomes a flicker of all colours, catching and reflecting the light ambient in the space. Her painting assemblages challenge the plane of frontality with their variations on the rectangular and closed surface. She is known for "travelling light," bringing nothing to the site. Nothing is imposed, everything is found; precision of selection and arrangement is everything, leaving us with a sense of commitment to the subjective process. Rather than treating the exhibition space as a container into which she places an artwork, she uses what is already in the milieu, both literally and figuratively. The work proposes that what is "allowed" is not the rectangle but its emptiness. The frame is, for her, what echoes in the space.

A small painting like *Untitled*, 2017, uses both closed surfaces and open spaces, solids and voids, and leaves us in doubt as to what is front and what is back, what is before and what is after. Her raw wood surfaces or edges are indifferently brushed with white paint. Another small painting of the same period, again *Untitled*, 2017, consists simply of a framed piece of stretched fabric where a gap has been left between the inner edge of the frame and the outer edge of the stretched fabric (silk in this case), revealing the excess fabric as a protrusion.



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1. Installation view, "Fernanda Gomes,"
2019, Pinacoteca do estado de Sao
Paulo. Courtesy Galeria Luisa Strina.
Photo: Pat Kilgore.

2. Installation view, "Fernanda Gomes,"
2017, Alison Jacques Gallery, London,
UK. © Fernanda Gomes. Courtesy Alison
Jacques Gallery, London. Photo: Will
Wiesner.

The fabric is bare as the frame is bare wood. Such unassuming but precise work invites concentration.

With her procedures and attitudes of spontaneity and simplicity, Gomes installs a process into a space that is the emerging of the visible, of an appearance—a perceptual process we could call "radiance," a term normally applied to the opening of a flower or the sun's rising above the horizon—instances that occur as new again and again. In a case where "appearing" is the subject, appearance and disappearance are equally aspects of the same cyclical movement and are on the terrain of the famous question of the here and now opened by oscillation with a simultaneous there and then. This has been a favoured pursuit within the works of high modernism.

Gomes works to preserve the emptiness of the work of art, what has been called, following Barnett Newman, "the here and now," or, in Bruce Nauman's words, the quality of being "there all at once." This is also a way of our understanding what constitutes our perception of beauty. The notion of emptiness in this context can be thought of as the gratuitousness of the work of art—the question of its freedom—and this may be where we are in touch with beauty. Gomes's task is not without risk; she goes close to the edge where "less" becomes literal.

In our current situation, with regard to the planet and its health along with our own, such things as voluntary poverty and "lessness" are becoming matters of great interest.

How does Gomes preserve the emptiness of an artwork? First she ensures that the work of art is perpetually in process, its incompleteness being foundational. To set this in place as a condition, she has to tackle several very resistant obstacles—one being that of the frame and the other that of the plane of representation. The complication of the frame is that of containment, separating space into an inside and an outside, and guarding this boundary. Gomes has an exquisite small painting that shows us a vaguely square fragment of anonymous material inserted into the corner of an otherwise empty frame, with the wall seen through it, struggling to become the plane of pictorial space.

The Belgian painter Marthe Wéry wrote in *Freedom in Painting* (Thierry de Duve, La Lettre Volée, Brussels, 1999), "Colour is alive, paper is alive, canvas and wood are alive." Her statement is helpful for the connection it makes among the organicity of painting's materiality, the doctrine of things having life and the scientific hypothesis of the planet earth as a living, breathing being. With her process orientation Gomes takes up the classic

questions posed in the paintings of high modernism with regard to sensuous organic materiality and theatricality. Perhaps the most illuminating for this animist theme are critic Harold Rosenberg's words from his essay "The American Action Painters," in *The Tradition of the New* (Horizon Press), where he proposes that the canvas itself is "the 'mind' through which the painter thinks." He might equally have said the "body" through which the painter thinks.

Gomes's paintings propose art as a passing through the space of the threshold. Passing through is like Winnicott's "transitional space," space that is in flux rather than stasis. It is, through its itinerancy, intermittence, a mode of presentness, a mode of absence. Her wall-mounted constructions, often improvised from already made residue and discarded containers, are casually reconstructed to function as provisional enclosures, alternations of closed and open space. Her room installations are equally assemblage works that weave us through a space and weave space through us.

As it was for the neo-concretists, Malevich's painting *White on White*, 1918, is an important reference for Gomes, a frame within a frame, a surface tilted on a surface. Lucio Fontana's slashed canvases are pertinent to the project of disputing the picture plane and disrupting its authority. These are also paintings capable of demonstrating the remarkable beauty in high modernist painting.

Gomes's procedure is the familiar gesture of fragmentation, isolation, staging. Her gathering of these diverse but particular kinds of things into a composition sets



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Paulo. Courtesy Galeria Luisa Strina.
Photo: Pat Kilgore.

2. Fernanda Gomes, *Untitled*, 2017,
wood, paint and tape, 23 x 50 x 5
centimetres. © Fernanda Gomes.
Courtesy Alison Jacques Gallery, London.
Photo: Will Wiesner.

up a stage, in the sense of a space where theatre can happen. What is displayed on the stage is enigmatic, but there is clearly a feeling of organization about this gathering and presenting. What we are looking at is an act of contrivance, a pose, but it is the posing of a pose, the pretending of its own dissimulation. In Gomes's stagings the gathered objects point backward in time to the various contexts from which things have been drawn while the enigmatic aspects point forward to the future, the unknowable.

In her process of configuring an installation, Gomes substitutes one mode of connection or relatedness for another, a displacement in which the destination of closure is exchanged for that of suspension, an indeterminacy within a semiotic-sensuous material union. Such a space is where the play of aesthetic experience allows for going nowhere, never arriving, pleasuring in getting lost. According to Robert Smithson, in *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York University Press), "when a thing is seen through the consciousness of temporality it is changed into something that

is nothing, and it ceases to be a mere object and becomes art." The transformation Smithson is referring to comes about when things are displaced from the purposive context of production and allow other modes of movement and placement to arrive. Displaced from a dominant temporality, which is goal-oriented, purposive, linear time, things are newly gathered and arranged by the intuitive criteria of aesthetic experience, and are freed into the lived time of subjectivity, immediacy and indeterminacy, unblocking time's play that is beauty. This is a time incompatible with that of productivity and organization, a time about which Hannah Arendt wrote that it is "the artist's role to be non-productive as he or she, strictly speaking, is the only 'worker' left in a labouring society and the only one who actually creates." ■

Stephen Horne is an art writer from Canada and living in France.