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Demarcating Art's Territory
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Author
Artist

Eduardo Jardim
Ivens Machado

Demarcating Art's Territory

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A rug made of concrete and covered with broken-glass shards, a boomerang, an object in the shape of a gigantic penis, the clear irony of a captionless Brazil map, all in 'apparent' concrete and glass shards – such are the objects that Ivens Machado is exhibiting in the present show.

Are Ivens Machado's works aggressive? They hamper joyful visitation. They shut me out from the possibility of manipulation – cutting sharpness. They turn me into the threatened viewer. They point to one way out – questioning.

Aggressive? For sure. With the aggressiveness that commentators have been ascribing to artworks charged with critical content, since Duchamp (a tradition, already!).

Let's take it easy. The way of questioning...

Contemporary art critique tries to present its itinerary as some kind of subversion. What is contemporary is what breaks up with tradition. Therefore, by dislocation, daily life objects take the place traditionally occupied by artworks. Thus, in the 60s, happenings turned each exhibition opening (the space of the show) into a party – moments of congeniality, not of observation. Also, the possibility of interaction between the public and the artwork (varied experiments with a 'participating audience') in another segment of visual arts operated an approximation (that wished to be subversive) of the relation artwork/audience.

In all instances, this is what it was all about: contemporary mind then considered traditional exhibition spaces (museum, art gallery) and the notion of an art-to-be-seen/not-to-be-touched as things under a process of extinction, thus proposing the setting up of new spaces and new relations.

In such spaces, within those new relations, artistic production ceased to be something that concerned a function of the eye retina, engaging now in getting the public involved via other appeals or new questionings.

In simple terms: at moment one of the process, the picture on the wall and the sculpture in the middle of the hall were understood as rigid poles of a relation to where – in homage – the eyes of the public were directed: Museum, Art Gallery, Salon.

At moment two, it came to be understood that visual arts' failure consisted in maintaining this relation. Subversive effort against artwork fetishism resulted in the multiple paths that have opened up for art nowadays (at least within the more consequential and consistent segments).

A wall – a traditional support – took up the role of a wall-hanging picture in one of Ivens Machado's earlier works. A ceramic tile wall turned into a picture, performing the function of questioning us in relation to the statute of the picture. One of the terms in the relation is checkmated.

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Other paths were traveled by artistic contemporary artworks that exerted a critical approach. But, above all, what really matters here is that the traditional relation between the gaze and the not-to-be-touched artworks has continually been one of the sure targets of such an exercise.

Basic questioning of this relationship insists on the fact that the distance that is present in the context of tradition should be replaced by an approximation between the artwork and its viewers.

The open-ended work senses the participatory path: Audience-experience Art. Everyone is an artist – provided, naturally, that art ends up being something playful, good-humored, for recreational afternoons.

Good intentions and inadequate solutions always come hand-in-hand when democracy in art – as in all else – is seen as something that belongs to the realm of the instinctive, of the spontaneous, an outcry.

If intention in fact breaks up with the traditional universe of art, there is no more rigidity in the relation between the artwork and its public; inadequate solutions end up by viewing the artist as just someone who is to accompany the development of the participatory calling – generally ludic – of the good-humored public. The same optics, always.

Production, in art, is the extension of something already given in the experience of the audience. Pax artistica. It is in control here and there, but rendering always explicit its concern about prolonging the unquestioned experience that was brought about.

That is, an intention that wished to be critical gets worn out in its effects. In the struggle to abolish the difference between art and experience/art and life, it does not bring any real benefit to either one: art misses out on the possibility of expressing something besides the experience per se, and neither experience nor life can be questioned through art's intervention.

Against a project that is not worried about the definition of purposes and the function of art, the works by Ivens Machado represent a blockage. This is the first reason for the broken-glass shards on the walls. A frontier that limits against. At first sight, it's about restoring a traditional difference. At first sight only, and I will say why. Against the idea of a tactile art, where the artwork would be the accommodation of gesture and experience, the objects made by Ivens Machado prevent any intimacy. Things cannot be touched. If I touch them, I will get hurt. It's materially necessary to shy away from the tactile, from the smooth handling, from the good playfulness.

It occurs that here the relation artwork/public is retrieved in a different sense as it is held in tradition. Here, at the same time that the limit denies, shuns, it also instates. And this is the fundamental trait of these works. Ivens Machado's output constitutes the initial landmarks of a territory that is the territory of art. When it says 'I am not', it's also saying: henceforth artistic production has its own space. This is the second reason for the presence of the glass shards. In the first place, defenses; in the second place, foundations. So, it all works as a wall – that is at the same time a divider and that which fences in the plot of ground where the house is built.

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It seems to me that the artist's possibility to say something in respect to life, to reality, starts being present in Ivens Machado's gesture, as he builds up differences.

The relations that this object maintains with the spectator are of a new order (in this sense there is no restoration). A relation that clearly calls for some rethinking regarding the statute of artistic work.

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Translated by Paulo Andrade Lemos

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