

Lygia Clark's Practices of Care and Teaching: Somaesthetic Contributions For Art Education

Luciana Mourão Arslan

Abstract: *This article examines the work of the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark through a somaesthetic perspective while highlighting the didactic and therapeutic aspects of her oeuvre. After thinking through the connections between Lygia Clark's art practices and somaesthetics, this article suggests some methods that could contribute to improving the contemporary field of art education.*

Keywords: *Lygia Clark, Art education, Somaesthetic, Brazilian art.*

Somaesthetics encompasses many studies suggesting new goals and methods in art education in the contemporary world: the improvement of sensory perception, the awareness and capacity to identify subtle relations between people and the world, and the identification of aesthetic experiences through the soma (living body). Here, I present an exemplary practice created by Lygia Clark, who predated and was never in contact with the new field of somaesthetics, but whose work displays how rich art education can be, if taken within a somaesthetic perspective.

This paper is organized in two parts. First, it will present a somaesthetic perspective on the practices of care and art education created by Lygia Clark, a Brazilian artist who developed a kind of therapy not rooted in psychology, but actually based on visual arts. The second part presents some contributions to art education based on my own ideas developed by means of a somaesthetic perspective.

I

Somaesthetic Practices of Care in Lygia Clark's Art

The Brazilian artist Lygia Clark was born in 1920. She developed her career in Brazil, but she also lived in France having moved to Paris to study in 1950. She later returned there to escape from the Brazilian political scene in the 1970s—when the government in Brazil was taken over by a military coup—and an intense period of censorship forced many artists to live abroad.

In many different activities within art and therapy, she built a controversial career as an artist, professor, and therapist. For example, without any formal education in psychology, she took care of people who suffered from borderline personality disorders. During different periods in her life, Clark created a set of artworks in order to activate soma-consciousness and self-improvement in patients and art participants. Clark made use of her knowledge about shapes, color, space, matter and surfaces to create specific situations that enhance what Richard Shusterman (2008) defines as somaesthetic perception and somaesthetic reflection.

Nowadays, her works are part of collections in many of the principal art museums around the world. She participated in the Venice Biennale twice (1958 and 1968), received the Guggenheim

International award in 1960 and her works have been shown in special expositions around the world, such as the recent exhibition named *The Abandonment of Art* in the New York Museum of Modern Art - MOMA.¹ In addition to those exhibitions, many studies have been made about her work.

Two examples of Clark's practices will be presented here. For a better understanding of these works, one should not be confined to an optical experience or a disengaged interpretation of them. Besides the fact that Clark created fascinating objects with very complex designs, these designs do not get their full sense on their own but instead depend on the participant's embodiments, because they intend to access a bodily memory through pre-verbal and non-verbal experience.

“Stone and Air” and “Cannibalistic Slobber”:

***propositions* created by Lygia Clark**

Lygia Clark's artistic works or *propositions* were created to be assembled as replicas by anyone, even if they had no artistic skills, merely by following some simple rules. In the following I show two of those *propositions*: *Stone and Air* and *Cannibalistic Slobber*. As they were written in the form of a recipe, the readers are able to repeat the experience, which I strongly suggest they do.

Created by Clark in the 1970s, *Stone and Air* is one of her *Relational Objects*: a set of objects made of simple materials like shells, plastic bags, gloves, rubber bands and paper: all designed to heighten somatic experience. This can be identified as a sort of aesthetics of precarity, an art trend known for the use of simple skills and ordinary materials; or they can simply be understood as a “domestic technology” (the name given by the visual artist Ruben Gershman to describe the behavior of Clark in collecting materials in supermarkets, streets, and all different places).

Stone and Air is one of those works that Lygia Clark used to treat patients. This particular work increases self-awareness; it especially helps us to take a deep breath, to try different speeds of breathing, in order to identify the connection between the air and our body movements and to highlight the fact that we exchange the same air, which connects our bodies like invisible glue.

Follow the *Stone and Air* sequence of instructions and some pictures showing how it is being performed by art students:

- Observe the materials: transparent plastic bag, round stone, rubber band and air. First of all observe and touch the materials. Feel the stone, which is natural, with an irregular, hard and unchangeable surface, it is cold, heavy and opaque; feel the plastic bag with almost the opposite features: it is a soft, bright, translucent industrialized material, with a very rectangular and flexible shape. Next, observe the rubber band, which is a kind of transitional material, because it brings the opaqueness of the stone and the flexibility of the plastic bag together. And finally, another important material for *Stone and Air*, as the name suggests, is the air, which is bonding us, being exchanged, filling all spaces, outside and inside our bodies. Take a deep breath just to sense this last substance: the air.
- Take the plastic bag in both hands and fill the bag with your own breath. Inhale deeply to fill your lungs and then exhale into the bag's cavity to fill it up. Do not fill the bag completely as we need some space to move the stone later. Clasp the top of the bag and tie the opening with the rubber band.
- Take one of the corners and press the corner inwards as to create a concavity. Take your stone and place it in the pressed corner that we have just created.

¹ This major retrospective devoted to the art of Lygia Clark in North America showed nearly 300 works done during the period between 1948 and 1988.

- The exciting part is to integrate oneself with the *Stone and Air*: move the stone by using your hands to press the bag, creating different rhythms to match your breathing.
- Try to feel the density of the bag containing your breath and the pressure of the stone floating in the air while you handle the bag.



Photos: Luciana Arslan. Title: Clark's "Stone and Air," with art students and professors, Federal University of Uberlandia, Brazil.

Stone and Air has an explicit goal to attain clearer body consciousness, which is one of the main principles and goals of somaesthetics; the work provides an experience in order to develop self-perception and self-improvement for the participant who performs it. In *Stone and Air* the participants have to match their breathing and body movements with the balancing of the stone. The air that goes inside the bag materializes the act of exhaling, suggesting a connection between the inner and outer spaces, which is an important dimension needed to feel the connection between our body and the environment.

It's difficult to define *Stone and Air* as an object of art, a sculpture, or even to define who the real artist is, since the air and the action only occur in the participant's body and the material

is shaped by the participant. That is why in *Stone and Air* the frontiers between artist, artwork, and spectator are completely blurred. The work only takes form in the soma of the participant. Although Clark created the “recipe,” the participant defines all the rhythms of the action. The form of the bag, which is filled with the participant’s air can be completely variable. The participant is always the central character in the *proposition*.

That explains why the art categories such as “happenings” or “performances” were entirely rejected by Clark, to define her *propositions*. Unlike some artworks created by Yoko Ono or Marina Abramovic, Clark never performed *propositions* as happenings. *Propositions* are wholly projected to be acted by others “to be carried out by a ‘participant’” (Lepecki, 2014, p. 279), to be embodied in the participants’ everyday actions. It provides the connection between an integrated aesthetic experience and everyday life, a good example of some of the principles affirmed by somaesthetics.

Like *Stone and Air*, the second work I present, namely *Cannibalistic Slobber*, also uses materials from everyday life: in this case, a spool of cotton thread. The sequence of this sensorial *proposition* needs at least 5 persons:

- One person has to lie down on the floor; preferably wearing only underclothes (because it allows the person to better feel the strings on their skin); in addition to that, the person has to close his or her eyes.
- About six people have to sit or kneel around the person lying down. They also have to put a spool of cotton thread into their mouths; slowly they should start to pull the thread from the spool in the direction of the person lying down.
- When all the cotton threads have come to the end of the spool, the participants can observe the new web formed by the thread and drops of saliva.
- Participants can gently remove the mass formed by the thread and saliva. The person lying down can now be informed that the *proposition* has been concluded.







Photos: Paulo Augusto Soares. Title: Clark's Cannibalistic Slobber, with art students and professors, Federal University of Uberlandia, Brazil.

By experiencing *propositions*, the participants can access body memory, discover new sensory aspects, feel the connection between their bodies and other bodies and the environment. Such art is a medium designed to develop self-awareness and social intuition simultaneously. Clark created gentle actions which not only involve the enrichment of everyone's perception while being executed, but may subsequently be reflected upon in other situations of everyday life.

The proposal *Cannibalistic Slobber* (1973) was initially suggested for a group of students in Sorbonne, Paris, France, where Clark gave a course named "gestural communication." Since then, it has been reinterpreted in many places, not only in art exhibitions. People reported having different sensations and feelings. In their experience of the work. Some participants relate it to a deeper perception of inner parts of the body, whilst others to the connection between different bodies or even a sensation of intimacy with strangers without any direct physical contact. As a matter of fact, we could go as far as saying that such experiences provide a kind of somatic self-awareness which englobes the consciousness of other surrounding bodies.

In my opinion, Clark's recognition in the art world is more linked to other aesthetic approaches than somaesthetics. For instance, her works have very elaborate forms, which allow formalistic appreciation. Yet, the relations between emptiness and fullness, balance and unbalance, and the use of contrasting materials and surfaces are, I believe, used by her not to enhance the language of art *per se*, but to enrich sensory somatic experience. However, Rolnik (2016) criticizes the fact that some *propositions* done by Clark, occasionally appear in exhibitions that provide an inadequate context for the visual appreciation of spectators (and not participants).

The art world sometimes overlooks the fact that the existence of these "artworks" had as the main goal the improvement of people. Clark, herself, insists, that the goal of these works is to make people feel the body. Repeating Lygia Clark's words: "(...) an art for the blind. Actually, it is no longer art, but a simple proposition to sense the body" (Butler, 2014: 243).

Clark's works show that visual art can expand the perception of our inner bodies, and enlarge our repertoire for using our bodies in our everyday life. That is the reason why somaesthetics and Clark's works seem to provide a perfect encounter or meeting place for advocating the deep relation between art and life. Both of these aesthetic approaches have roots in aesthetic

experiences and in somatic therapies, and both expand into interdisciplinary territories. In a theoretical, as well as in a practical way, they expose how aesthetic experience can provide more intensely meaningful life.

II

Somaesthetics, Lygia Clark and Art Education

The role of a professor was somewhat neutralized in Clark's complex career. The exercise of highlighting the didactic features in Clark's work is not entirely new but needs more attention to be better understood. The film *Sur les traces de Lygia Clark: Souvenirs et évocations de ses années parisiennes*² presents the memories of five of Clark's students. This short movie suggests Clark's freedom of creating original strategies of teaching based on awareness, practices of self-care, meliorism, improvisation, and joy in the present moment. It also depicts how Clark blends traditional divisions between teacher, art components, and students. Another Brazilian researcher, Mirian Celeste Martins (2011), notes the procedures created by Clark to present the idea of an art teacher as a "proponent," an educator who reinforces the idea of someone who can promote aesthetic experiences by means of special situations. Martins (2011), whose discourse is clearly based on Dewey's theory, argues for the importance of developing sensory perception in art education, insisting that it is more important than to "present" art images or ideas to be exclusively perceived on a mental plane.

The improvement of the senses helps us to interact more intensively with the world, to live better. The senses allow the art teacher to derive more enjoyment from the class, to identify better ways to be in contact with students, to be more empathetic with them. Somaesthetics helps art teachers in their classrooms and beyond, including in their personal lives. It would be a good idea if preparatory courses, as much for teachers as for students, could include somaesthetic contents regarding self-care, self-awareness and sensorial perception.

The mainstream of contemporary art denies art any utility to life and society. It has to be autonomous. This perspective has a terrible effect in art education. Some art curriculums are structured on this idea of an art detached from life, which valorizes art as language (pure language) and discussing art only in the theoretical context of a very traditional Western Culture. To bring the somaesthetics perspective to art education is to bring back the Deweyan perspective that affirms improved experience and sensorial perception as a main goal of art education. By defending the idea that aesthetic experiences and art can contribute to life's improvement, art education can gain more importance in the education curriculum.

Everyday life can be framed in aesthetic experiences, and even the art displayed in museums can become embodied in our lives. Many art works, and not just those from Clark, can be fully understood only through the body and through the vivid somatic experiences they can provide. By valorizing only visual perception and ideas, art education denies the embodiment, the pleasure, and the entertainment we can obtain through art and from aesthetical experiences. Somaesthetics goes beyond the classroom³ and the university: the professor who embodies somaesthetics improves her sensitivity to the context, her empathy with others, her powers of focusing, all of which also produce better teaching, learning, and aesthetic experiences.

2 *Sur les traces de Lygia Clark: Souvenirs et évocations de ses années parisiennes*. Director: Paola Anziché, Irene Dionisio, production Fluxlab, Torino, Itália, 2011. 26'. Dvd, color, sound, Hdv-super 8 film (available in <https://vimeo.com/122889908>).

3 After having studied for 13 months at the Center for Body Mind and Culture at Florida Atlantic University learning about somaesthetics, I realized that many changes took place, not only in my specific field of research in art education, but also in my everyday life. This experience was endowed by a postdoctoral scholarship from CAPES (Coordenação de Pessoal de Ensino Superior) and the support from Federal University of Uberlândia.

Finally, some guidelines can be designed for art educators who would like to pursue a somaesthetic perspective and follow the example of Clark as an art educator:

- To challenge the frontiers between art and life;
- To accept the idea that aesthetic experiences can occur outside the art world;
- To maintain the goal of meliorism, which includes the idea that art education can also improve the art of living;
- To treat the body, not as an instrument, but as a soma – a sentient, perceptive, integrated entity capable of understanding and generating ideas;
- To study and teach artists who challenge the traditional art world; to sustain a wide perspective on aesthetic experience (involving a multicultural repertoire);
- To have the courage to present new attitudes; to be vividly aware and to enjoy the classroom moment (which allows improvisations);
- Defend the use of everyday materials and everyday experiences;
- To be open to an empathetic relation with students.

The somaesthetics lens can help art educators to understand and convey to their students the powerful impact of aesthetic experience provided by art. Moreover, it can help them improve their lives and those of their students by transforming the classroom into a more enjoyable place. Lygia Clark embodies a wonderful example of this idea.

References

- Anziché, Paola, and Irene Dionisio, directors. 2011. *Sur les traces de Lygia Clark. Souvenirs et évocations de ses années parisiennes*. Production Fluxlab, Torino, Itália. 26'. Dvd, color, sound, Hdv-super 8 film.
- Butler, Cornelia H., Luis Pérez-Oramas, and Lygia Clark, eds. 2014. *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art, 1948- 1988*. New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art.
- Lepecki, André. 2014. "The Making of a Body: Lygia Clark's Anthropophagic Slobber," in *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art, 1948-1988*. Edited by Cornelia H. Butler, Luis Pérez-Oramas, and Lygia Clark. New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art.
- Martins, Mirian Celeste. 2011. "Arte, 'Só na aula de arte?'" *Revista Educação, Porto Alegre* 34.3: 311-316.
- Rolnik, Suely. 2012. "Archive for a Work-Event: Activating the Body's Memory of Lygia Clark's Poetics and its Context / Part 1," *Manifesta Journal* 13: 72-81. Accessed December 1, 2016. <http://www.manifestajournal.org/issues/fungus-contemporary/archive-work-event-activating-bodys-memory-lygia-clarks-poetics-and-its#>.
- Shusterman, Richard. 2012. "Aesthetics as Philosophy of Art and Life," *JTLA Journal of the Faculty of Letters* 37: 1-6.
- . 2003. "Entertainment: A Question for Aesthetics," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43.3: 289-307.
- . 2008. *Body Consciousness: a Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1998 "Two Questions on Canibalism and Rap," in *XXIV Bienal de São Paulo*. Curadores Paulo Herkenhoff, Adriano Pedrosa. *Roteiros* 2: 156-147.