

THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE TINIEST DETAIL

TANIA RIVERA

Livia Flores's work is almost impossible to get a handle on. She has no clearly defined or recognized style or strategy—everything here is fleeting and undergoes constant transformation. An unstable anti-work that radically proclaims art (in life).

To accompany and faithfully transmit such a poetics, some of the phrases in this text should be capable of disappearing into an invisible fold in the peer, to reemerge later at another point and change the whole composition. Her words may well in fact be pieces to be interlinked in such a way as to form phrase-trajectories for each eye, like the plaster plaques in *Shipwrecked* (at the IBEU Gallery, 1994) and tied by cables to a bottle. What message could be placed inside this bottle thrown in the sea doesn't matter, the main question is that this (this fold) entwines us with all, shipwrecked.

Livia is interested in the tiniest detail. The subtle deviation—the “little conspiracies”, as she calls them—that gain strength when the “discrete” presence of a pile of cheap blankets, alongside the pieces from the Empire's period on display at the Museu Imperial in Petrópolis, suddenly take the material form of an enormous social and historical chasm, which still exists today in Brazil, between those who hold power and

those who serve them (or, worse still, are completely excluded from the system). How many of these blankets do we perhaps not see in the streets, hiding rather than warming the street-dwellers?

The blankets re-appear in the 2012 exhibition at the Progetti Gallery, where they have become readymade flags or standards (or perhaps inert faded *parangolés*). They become sculptural thanks to the combination with plaster, another fragile albeit solid material, and enter into dialogue with the aspirations, as geometrical as they were human, of neoconcretism. They also do not fail to provide an echo of Beuys's felt and his provocative idea of the 1970s of “thoughts about what sculpture *could be* and how the concept of sculpting could be extended to all invisible materials used by anyone”. Especially when these “anybodies” are precisely those among us who are cloaked in a strange invisibility.

The works of Livia Flores, addressing the invisible materials of each one of us, are rigorously *unstable*: their elements are taken up in new combinations, as if the terrain on which the artist operates were an ever-moving jigsaw puzzle. Like the blankets, the wooden sticks that covered

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**TRABALHO
DE GREVE,**
[STRIKE WORK], 2012
gesso e cobertor
[PLASTER AND BLANKET]
67 x 164 x 48 cm
193 x 100 x 24 cm
Galeria Progetti
Rio de Janeiro

the floor in *Puzzlepolis* (2002) re-appear ten years later in the same exhibition at the Progetti Gallery, this time piled up all along one of the walls (the floor becomes a wall or shelf). The sides of the sticks, which are normally invisible, transform them into something else, a series of intervals, cracks. In some of them books can be made out (Apollinaire's *Œuvres*, Tristan l'Hermite's *Les amours*), on others a page selected from the *Bacchae*. One phrase from Euripides's tragedy served as a motto for the whole exhibition: "the megalight of Agave bacchanal gladdens me: the solitude was a desert to me". Another refers to the potential sound of the sticks on which one can no longer step: "it is the rumble of the god ululating inside us".

Elements that are reused in some way bring the memory of work undone and materially make up a kind fragmented poetic history. They are loaded with time. Each one of them "is a time bomb", Livia remarks.

Displacements

Livia Flores's poetic task is almost invisible. She sheds light on something that was already there, waiting in a fold in life. It may be the tiniest detail and yet powerful like the cardboard and junk objects that Clóvis Aparecido dos Santos produced at Fazenda Modelo (an institution where Rio de Janeiro street-dwellers were given a place to stay) which Flores brought to Sérgio Porto in *Puzzlepolis* (2002).

In this installation, loose sticks make up the unsteady floor on which the visitor must walk to approach the objects: a house and a lampshade. The object and Clóvis's fragile model are involuntarily redolent of those of Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, with which they radicalized the proposal that was already fundamental for them—with their fierce affirmation of the precariousness and adversity in which we live, the madness (which echoes around the Bispo do Rosário and the Engenho de Dentro Psychiatric Clinic within), of marginality.



In the sticks, all the possibilities of meetings and combinations (all the dramas, the dramas of all of us). We are left milling that sound. The Clóvis(es), the artist wrote in a text in the leaflet accompanying the exhibition. The sound she refers to is that of the pieces of wood being displaced beneath our feet. *The Clovis(es)* refers to a carnival tradition still present in the northern and eastern zones of the city of Rio de Janeiro. They are groups wearing fancy dress, whose name is supposed to derive from the English word *clown*, make up a single cohesive mass and produce noise by banging balls or other objects on the ground, which is why they are also known as the *bate-bolas*. There is usually something terrifying about them, capable of scaring children. *Puzzleópolis* calls into question the beautiful (but also terrible) power of human cohesion. The half-boxed, maybe loose, sticks are *us* (jigsaws with thousands of combinations, whose pieces are infinite

and almost identical to one another). The world is in the sticks. And over them, the poetry; a crazy, gratuitous, carnivalesque and marginal construction (which provides shelter for no-one).

Flores refuses any logic of an autonomous work of art detached from the world in order to turn life around – in the gallery, on the street, in the museum. Her objects carry subtle allegories that enter into dialogue with culture and reverberate with the tensions between each individual and the common weal in which they move. In this she reveals herself to be an heir of Oiticica, for whom *the museum is the world; it is everyday life*. And culture is an *open root* under constant construction. Just as the artist found a *parangolé* on a piece of wasteland, in the ramshackle construction of a street-dweller, Flores finds poetic fragments of the world – not for making something else out of, but for showing them in themselves – and with



them stretching the limits and boundaries of art and society.

In her most radical intervention, for the 26th São Paulo Biennale of 2004, the artist showed a profusion of constructions produced by Clóvis making up a kind of city (*Puzzleópolis II*). It's a kind of "change of place", Flores says, a change of "places of the eye". It reveals the products of another and underlines a fundamental intervention of hers: the use of film in the sheets of glass that make up one of the walls, allowing the city to invade the installation during the day and its lights and contours at night. This minimal gesture is subtle, but powerful, it realizes the potential of the passage, the mirage that could make Clóvis's precarious and gratuitous work contaminate and invade the whole metropolis, blurring the boundaries during the day, extending its light into infinity after dark.

This is not an act of appropriation. Flores is drawing attention to the fact that capturing the city and the lights of the city was already one of her great preoccupations in her super-8 films and in the piece *Lambe* (2002), which presented dozens of 3x4 photos of buildings in the center of the city of Rio de Janeiro, inverting the power relation expressed in the fact that many business and trade centers demand that visitors provide ID. The 3x4 also gives each building an *identity*, the civic existence of a citizen, echoing the presence of an *us* in the stick-jigsaw from *Puzzleópolis*.

Flores found, in the incessant work that Clóvis produced for any art circuit, something that was already hers. The image that Clóvis produced "is also mine", she says. "I did not think what I thought alone", as Georges Bataille had already put it. The artist says that she is dealing with something like an "identification", but I believe that a good word would be *estrangement*: a movement through which something of yourself is recognized in the other. There is something that reconnects me, albeit precariously, with the other (these shipwrecks). What I take to be mine

seems strangely outside of me in the other, bringing news of something that, like a message in a bottle, is meant for someone else— and, by way of a strange inversion, shows that I was already in it. Or rather I was *in between*, floating in this great sea, as we all are.

Taken over by what she calls "the temptation to invert", Livia courageously withdrew from the place in the limelight so desired by all Brazilian artists, in a gesture full of implications for the art market, the concept of authorship in contemporary art and the definition of the work of art in this contemporary age. The fact that this act was widely misunderstood shows the extent to which its critical power crossed a line that is taboo even to those who see themselves as the heirs of Duchamp.

During her residency in Recife (MAMAM, 2007), Flores works, after a chance encounter the night of her arrival, with a street artist known as Gargamel. With his eyes blindfolded, he showed the patrons of local bars an invisible canvas reading "SOS artists". Livia noticed the coincidence that the works sold by Gargamel had relatively similar kinetic motives to the work she had been producing for her show *How to make cinema without film?*

Having decided to bring this encounter to the gallery, she spent the next few days looking for this curious character but she could not find him.

So she stuck a poster on the gallery door saying "Looking for Gargamel", and reproduced the blindfolded figure and the SOS inscription in drawings. What had belonged to the other, but no longer did, had become hers again. It is a question of re-forging ties between the shipwrecks in art and someone will simply reject them, subtract themselves from them or even disappear, when the local is not central to the place you are living, but rather of a *displacement*, from one to the other.

Taking account of this displacement and making use of it has a comic air to

COMO FAZER CINEMA SEM FILME?

[HOW TO MAKE CINEMA
WITHOUT FILM], 2007
MAMAM no Pátio
Recife



use the language of José Gil), *that we are*. The fundamental is the minimum – or, to use the Duchampian term, *infrathin*.

Infrathin is almost nothing: some gesture of displacement, of *décalage*. The introduction of a hiatus. Duchamp did not define it properly, but declines it, so to speak, in a series of annotations and fragments. For example: "2 forms fitted into the same mold differ from one another by a separative infra-fine value." The graph of the expression varies, sometimes appearing as though in a single term (*infrathin*), at others materializing the hiatus as its center, in the graphic space between *infra* and *thin* or in the use of a hyphen. It is a minimal difference: "all are identical", but, however identical they are (and however many identical things there are) they approximate to this separative *infrathin* difference."

Hence "allegory (in general)" is "an application of the *infrathin*". It means presenting something that is not the same, in a game of approximation and distinction. And, in this approximation, something causes friction, something contaminates, something of the one stays

with the other, like the smell of tobacco smoke on the mouth, to give another example presented by Duchamp himself. There is something like a flawed meeting, something like love, in the *infrathin* (this is exactly what is addressed in *The Bride Stripped by her Bachelors, even*). "The *infrathin* is diaphanous and sometimes transparent." It is like the condensed water vapor in my breath on a polished glass or metal surface.

The *infrathin*, in fact, carries something of a presence—lost, subtracted—of the subject. It is a subtle impression, as, in another example from Duchamp, the heat on a seat that someone has just got up from. Livia underlines its character of a fleeting impression, which would call into question the very possibility of *impression* (in the sense of a thing or an event being imprinted, reproducing it and fixing it in some manner). What does art imprint on life? Is it not precisely a case of something that does not leave an imprint, something *infrathin*, but that defines art as a minimal deviation from everyday things?

Livia Flores's camera approaches gradually, following the route the artist

passes along daily, with an old tire dumped on the side of the road. Infrathin, the shape is suddenly revealed to be a snake that has been run over. This encounter, this moment in which "an event is lived in an image", in the language of Maurice Blanchot, takes material form for the artist in small super-8 films. As short as the event, the film is a plane-sequence lasting a maximum of three minutes; in other words, it is just one roll of film.

It is a measure (we could say that the film becomes a tape-measure) of the distance between me and the thing seen. A distance which is life itself, regulating itself in the interval between complete withdrawal (or disappearance) and "the maximum point of magnetism", to cite Flores's expression. She is interested in filming things while moving, from a car, to experiment with this play of distance and magnetism (the maximum point would be the running over of the snake).

Such interplay implies the passage of time. "The possible is something infrathin", Duchamp noted. The possible, because it still is not—and thus implies a difference. In this hiatus the future pulses, time itself (and therefore desire as well, probably). Shortly thereafter, Duchamp states this explicitly. "The possible implying becoming—the passage from one to the other has a place in the infrathin". The passage.

In everything one sees—or rather, in everything that is experienced in an image—there is a passage and a loss. And a suspension, opening out into something unexpected. It is this, without doubt, that cinema has taught us about life.

What does it leave behind, a life understood thus as passage, loss and suspension and therefore turned into art? A brief hiatus, the very one that magnetizes us and keeps us at a distance, that blank message in a bottle that can finally be communicated: "infrathin caresses" (Duchamp, again and always).



Without Film, Verbal Mirages

Cinema without film is life. Its moments of poetry.

Flores's proposition/provocation in the phrase "How to make cinema without film?" is the high point in her ironic questioning.

There are various folds and germs of poetry in the world that could be made into cinema, or rather, brought to the eye. And to the mind. "Cinema without film depends basically on displacements operated or perceived in space and may occur in any place at any moment", the artist writes. It is important that this event not be inscribed on a roll of film, or, in other words, that it rid itself of the illusion that this instant lived as an image can ever be repeated. It can also occasionally be inscribed in the materiality of film, but with a view to manifesting itself elsewhere: outside the field.

One of her super-8s came about as a consequence of her observing the cohesive

group that a larvae made in her front garden. The organisms were displaced there coming and going, in a compact fashion, despite the subtle individual movements imprinting their surfaces like waves, belying or at least problematizing their compact character. *Rio Morto* [Dead River] (1999) is a travelling film about the canal that has this curious name, in a constant displacement of inversion that operates on the surface of the water in reflecting the landscape on its banks.

It deals, above all, with dislocation, with the image in movement. And of us displaced, in front of these subtle "cinematic unfoldings of the world". As for the 1999 exhibition (Galeria Cândido Portinari, UERJ), which consisted of the projection of various super-8s, Flores is stating that everything is in movement, including the viewer, who is "implicated in the scene". In 2000, the play of mirrors and inflexions in the projects brings to the Agora/Capacete space the scene in which



we are embedded, but also problematizes it, by fragmenting and multiplying its windows and its vistas. We are not simply in the scene, in the film, but rather in movement between multiple scenes.

Each scene is affirmed as a fragment of the world, "a cut in broad daylight". The artist resists film editing, narrative construction, and the illusion of the single window, by replacing it with an unambiguous reality. She thus aligns herself with Hélio Oiticica's *Quase cinema*, in his criticism of editing and affirmation of "frame-moments", capable of criticizing the cinema as spectacle and laying the basis for what the artist calls "fragmented foundation of the limits of non-representation," instead of taking, as in Oiticica and Neville d'Almeida's *Cosmococas*, the frame as a fragment that resists any meaning and representation. Flores regards each roll of super-8 film as a fragmentary unit with the displacement it carries, somewhat in the same way as Hélio Oiticica did in the short films he produced in New York.

It is not so much cinema, therefore, that interests Livia Flores, but rather "the incidence of the cinematic over unstable modes of production in art". Again Duchamp is the master with his anemic cinema (in anemic cinema's blood there is a surplus of language and a lack of the iron of illusion) and with the Big Glass and his "cinematic mode of incessant becoming".

"In time an object is not the same object a second later" noted Duchamp thinking of the infrathin. It is exactly this interval that interests Livia, this "figure of a lapse between what was and what isn't anymore". She wants to draw this. And also the "implications for becoming". It is fundamental to make the thinking of the sudden interval available. Cinema without film, then, deals fundamentally with filming time itself. Livia affirms that "drawing condenses time, hides it", while "to film is to film time".

Film is infrathin at every interval between the frames. Infrathin is the attempt to draw the wind blowing over the grass in the landscape of Vargem Grande, where the artist lived for many years. And the fact that the wind stopped exactly when the artist decided to film it and the grass remained still for days. Infrathin is the evidence that something is removed between life and the image.

How to make cinema without film? is a provocation to go beyond the simplistic and mimetic discourse about technology to show the reverse side of this relation between the image and the world. It is a "mirror-question", as Livia always put it, which "works like a repellent" to break with the tenacious illusion of unambiguous equivalence between reality and cinema.

"In general, the world comes out better in a photo", the artist notes.

Instead of adhering to photographic or cinematographic aestheticism in the implicit (and politically questionable) task of improving the world (by giving it a good image), it is a matter of questioning the photo (*improving it*, but in another sense). In other words, it is a matter of folding and subverting the logic of cinema and of photography to force them to show life. Rejecting the projection screen as a window open to another reality and pointing to the projector, emphasizing the rectangle of light—and spreading it around the world.

In the early 1980s, Livia was already conforming to this critique, attacking the television screen allegorically, by breaking down its bands of color by the use of wrapping paper printed with a pattern of diamonds in blue, red and green stripes on a silver background. These pieces were shown again in 2007, this time with the marks of the ravages of time on the paper. The graphic design is re-applied using a mirrored background that brings the world into this analysis (this break with) the technological image. It is, in the artist's own words, an "allegory of the digital", but also "of the unrecorded".

SEM TÍTULO

(UNTITLED), 1999
instalação com filmes
e projetores super-8
(INSTALLATION WITH FILM
AND SUPER 8 PROJECTORS)
Galeria Cândido
Portinari, UERJ
Rio de Janeiro



In film, it may be a question of faithfully registering that which cannot be registered, that which escapes image apprehension and yet is an image par excellence: the dream. In *A cadeia alimentar* [*The Food Chain*], Livia notes that "[d]reams, like real images, are the raw material for films". The writing of dreams had already been rendered in drawing on carbon paper (1993) and dream words already made up the "map" of *Street of the Hotel with no Past* which was the motto of the 2000 exhibition at Agora/Capacete.

Something is subtracted from and resists the technological regime of the image. Something precisely that can "magnetize" me, almost knock me back, combining violence and poetry. "I look for cracks through which to escape from the real without film that knocks me back", Livia Flores wrote. But I think that what she does is, first of all, *seek out*—or even *rip open*—cracks through which she can glimpse the reality of the real without film that reaches out to us. Suddenly, the shipwreck's bottle opens and a brief

instant of the world escapes from it.

The film can be the precarious (and invisible, virtual) thread between one shipwreck and another. In what she calls an "artist's utopia", Livia Flores dreams, in her text *Uncut/How to make cinema without film?*, of "the film in each of our heads, without a camera or a projector, at the same time completely shareable. Thus, in so far a new mobile, discreet, erratic and unstable topology is invented for itself, cinema without film could be a heterotopia. More precisely: a pathaphysical problem".

And she concludes, with a provocation:

"Greatly missed Jarry, father of Duchamp!"

SEM TÍTULO

[UNTITLED], 2000
instalação com filmes
e projetores super-8,
vidros e espelhos
[INSTALLATION WITH FILM
AND SUPER-8 PROJECTORS,
GLASS AND MIRRORS]
Espaço Agora/
Capacete
Rio de Janeiro