



DÉCOUVERTE DES AMÉRICAINS, 2013

Projeção de vídeo, áudio | Video projection, audio | 28'14" (loop)
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RODRIGO CASS

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Unraveling the meaning of *Material Manifesto* [Manifest Material], the title of this first solo exhibition by Rodrigo Cass at Galeria Fortes Vilaça, is a good way to begin a path through the artist's poetic universe. Here, *material* has its most everyday sense: that which refers to the body; the set of everything that goes into the composition of the artwork. For its part, *manifest* refers to what is clear, evident, shown. In the context of Cass's work, we see that the material arises as a sort of flipside of what is manifest, in the sense of a structure that does not wish to appear; which provides the basis for what is manifest, for what is revealed. Erecting the manifest on the most banal basis, on what would normally be opaque, giving a second skin to the one-dimensional - this is the invisible and essential connection that unites the two terms.¹

Running opposite to strictly conceptual works, in which the perceptible dimension takes second place, Cass is interested in a clashing with the concreteness of things, extracting the foundations for the artwork's thrust from its qualities, texture, weight and function. Even in the videos - his main means of expression - this phenomenological nature is clear, along with the idea of process, which is very important in his work.

The artist has stated that his work takes place in the continuous grammatical tense. The main characteristic of the continuous tense is to indicate an ongoing past, present or future action. In Cass's case, this conceptual bearing affirms an investigation that privileges the process, the transitive verb.

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In *Libera Abstrahere* (2014), we see a *mise-en-scène* consistent with the pattern of all the artist's videos - a fixed camera, a few objects, an asceticism that implies an ethics against the regime of the spectacle, the repetition of a single act, colors that actively participate in the construction of the artwork's meaning.

A hand enters the field of view, placing an empty paint can on a pile of books, which are resting on a surface of vibrant orange. A stream of silver metallic powder falls from the top of the scene, into the can, slowly filling it. A bit of excess flows out over its brim. The same hand removes the full recipient from the scene. As a sign of where the can rested, on the top book we see an empty circle, which is quickly filled by the rest of the silver powder that is still falling. It should be noted that the empty circle becomes a sort of mirroring of the can - a new hyper-

transitory container, rapidly taken over by another content, which will be unmade at the same speed.

Cut. A new pile of books in the same scene. The can is once again empty and placed into the scene, and the same situation of pouring and overflowing is repeated, once again with leftover powder around the empty circle.

Libera Abstrahere condenses references to painting and sculpture. The can was once full of paint. Today it arises as a container, holding a circumstantial, fragmented content, which when brought together seems to form a cohesive whole. The books that support the can are containers to which we always associate an elevated degree of content. Cass leaves them closed, as a basis for a transitory sculpture/painting.

The re-incidence of the brilliant flow into the can takes on temporal contours. It is like an hourglass, measuring time according to the interval needed to fill the can's volume. The relation between color and time brings to mind a work by Hélio Oiticica - an important reference for the artist. In *B 38 Bólido lata 01* (1966), Oiticica sets fire to a can of oil-soaked oakum. In the photographic record of the artwork/action carried out in the streets of Rio de Janeiro we see the orange flames coming out of the small can in all their intensity. The fire refers to the cycle of life. It arises, reaches its peak, vibrates, becomes weaker and slowly fades. This exit from a formal dimension and entrance to a happening that presents color as a temporal structure has its origin in Oiticica's program and echoes with power and singularity in Cass's work.

When we say that the artist thinks about his practice in the continuous tense, as something that is taking place, we should note not only the repetition enacted in the video performances, but also the choice of everyday elements and the shifts that art can bring about in them. Cass has stated that he keeps certain objects and materials for months or even years until the day they become part of a work process. The artistic act is therefore a chance to breathe life into that which was in a state of dormancy. Inventing for the most prosaic entities new and unexpected modes of being in the world is one of the aims of the artist's work that corroborates his affiliation with neoconcretism.

In the video *Copo Americano* several of these aspects are manifest. The setting is frugal, stark, and the choice of colors is rigorous. A green glass bottle, a transparent cup, a pink tabletop. In the background there is a milder tone of green. The narrative is simultaneously similar and opposite to that of the previous work. A hand enters the scene and spills the water contained in the bottle outside the cup, at its side, leaving it empty while wetting the table. All of the objects in the scene possess very clear places in daily life, but here their

purposes are shifted. It is precisely when they do not rigorously fulfill their cold, catalogued obligations that we can finally perceive them. Otherwise, they remain unperceived, dulled by the gaze dimmed by habit.

Copo Americano is a sort of still-life in movement which, without noisy display and faithful to the silence characteristic of Cass's work as a whole, gains power as the action is repeated. The "mistake" implicit in the gesture of consciously spilling the water outside the cup is as simple as it is powerful. Once again there is a separation between container and content. It should be noted that it is precisely this caesura that draws attention to the air that inhabits the cup. This is just as important as the liquid that falls from the bottle. The work makes absence an essential element of its syntax. The air becomes expressive, like the intervals of silence in a musical composition, or the blank space between the stanzas of poem. One needs to know how to listen to the intervals, to read the break, in order to understand the whole. Here, the air and the emptiness are not "representations" of nothingness, but rather take on the status of a significant material in the work.

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These are performative works. In everyday terms, "performative" normally refers to large, effusive, prolix gestures that attract attention. Cass's video performances, on the contrary, make use of economical movements; they are discrete, terse, synthetic, nearly Spartan. The fact that the body and the face never appear, but only the hands, or at most the arms as well, contributes to the absence of drama and expression. There is no subjective content here, but rather hands that work methodically and repeatedly on the same material.

In this sense, the de-dramatized performance *Hand Catching Lead*, by Richard Serra, is an important reference for Cass. In that film from 1968, pieces of lead are dropped from above the field of view at a continuous pace, while the hand that is being filmed tries to grab them. It is a repeated gesture of a sort of failure, since the hand is never able to catch all of the lead that falls. The hand in *Hand Catching Lead* does not have efficiency as a goal. What we have is a continuous movement of opening and closing the hands in an operation which, according to Rosalind Krauss, "does not aim to achieve success, but only to repeat and repeat: one of the striking aspects of this film is its quality of relentless persistence - of doing something over and over again without regarding 'success' as any particular kind of climax."²

A contemporary with minimalism, Serra differentiated his work from it through an investigation analogous to what we referred to in the opening paragraph of this text. Running opposite to the stripped-down visuality of minimalism, in the

1960s the North American artist began to construct a work on an empirical basis, privileging the materials used and the presence of the body.³ Both minimalism and constructivism are inheritors of a modern philosophy that considers the world as a mental representation, distancing itself from the perceptible dimension. Phenomenology and its return to the “things themselves” reverberated in the neoconcrete project in Brazil, a fundamental development in the construction of Cass’s poetic program.⁴

Civiltà Americana. The book after which the work is entitled is resting on sheets of pink paper. A hand enters the scene to carry out the same gesture dozens of times: wrapping and unwrapping the book using the various sheets of paper. We clearly identify the material being handled; the color is dull, the muted pink borders on the melancholic; its texture is rough. We have already seen it in stationery shops, wrapping food items in grocery stores, and it is from this sort of Manila paper that they make the confetti and streamers for Carnival.

While the title of the book suggests a study on American civilization, what takes place in the 8 minutes and 53 seconds of the film is an evocation of a civilizing process that ends up in ruin. The Enlightenment ideals - the conviction that reason is capable of leading humanity progressively toward peace and social justice, for the sake of its emancipation - were never realized. The American civilization victorious in the postwar period also found that it had inherited the worst collateral effects of progress - the driver that should bring us toward a better future.

Some may question: how can the mere gesture of wrapping and unwrapping a book with a symbolic title dozens of times lead to this interpretation? Because it seems that it is through this closer scale and proportion, in which the body is engaged, that contemporary art makes its simultaneously discrete and sharp response to the impasses of modernity in its political and aesthetic registers.

The ordinary paper whose function in the world is to preserve, guard, wrap and protect, which is commonly linked to commerce and the exchange of merchandise, is presented as an object of an insistent and blind dysfunctional action. With the passage of time, we see the pieces of paper torn, worn, taken apart, crumpled. From the first to the last frame the hands accelerate their process of construction/destruction. At the end, they seem tired. This cycle suggests the crumbling of the civilizing, cultural ideas, inherent to a project of the world in the last century. We note that the act of deconstructing something, in Cass, takes on an active power of construction. In this case, it is only the deconstruction, being converted into ruin and accepting its status as such, which allows for a construction free of the farce that identifies the belief in progress and its civilizing precepts.

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"The distinction between Serra's sculpture and that of minimalism comes in part out of Serra's rejection of the *a priori* geometries of the grid. For the grid is an abstract tool describing a space which always begins at a point just in front of the person who views it. The diorama of analytic sensibility, the grid, forever leaves the viewer outside looking in."⁵

These lines, by Rosalind Krauss, bring us to another part of Cass's production: that of his drawings and what can be called "studies on pictorial space." Concrete and the grid, symbols of modernity - the first in architecture and the second in art - are incarnated and subverted in the form of sheets of lined paper. Whereas in modernity they were both synonyms of distance, coldness and heroic scales, today they arise as inverted signs: they are familiar, beckoning for proximity in their intimate scale, with an unexpected power deriving from their fragility. We thus witness the assumption of a *sensible geometry*, interlinked with the ephemerality of life. We know that this tearing of the space of the painting occurred in various steps in 20th century art. Russian constructivism in its own way, Brazilian concretism in response to a figurative identity that had nothing of the modern, and neoconcretism with its decisive leaps were all essential chapters of this journey, aimed at a freer art closer to life.

The series of ruled notebook papers constructed with molded concrete gains force when viewed as a set rather than isolatedly. In *Pautas Herdadas: Léxico Concreto* the lines arise in their places, duly straight on two sheets, as though one were positive, the other negative. The title refers to the utopia idealized by the constructive project, our greatest legacy. To remedy the chaos of society, the antidote would be the ordering of the forms.

For its part, *Espaço Libertado* is presented as a deconstruction of the lines on the ruled paper, a fracture in the previous rigidity. Fracture is perhaps a strong word in light of the delicacy that pervades these works. Breaking, twisting, shifting - this is what Cass brings about, pushing geometry out of its linear process.

In *Continentes* (2012) a wooden frame serves as a support for small piles erected with Carnival confetti, the pallet is toned down to foggy blues, pinks and greens. Each of the piles constitutes a provisory construction whose fall is imminent. Loose pieces of confetti at the base of the painting are vestiges of past collapses. Appropriating an element used in Brazil's biggest street party to use it in the elaboration of an imperfect painting is emblematic. Cass's works announce a sort of *débole* constructivism.⁶

In *Découverte des Américains* the analogy with neoconcretism is intentional. A fixed camera, a strident, solar yellow imbues the wall in the background. The

floor is covered with light-toned sand. Various colored sheets of cellophane held by two hands in the upper part of the screen fall, one by one. They are half *parangolés*, half spatial reliefs. Initially each sheet is flat, but once it is let loose, it falls randomly and becomes three-dimensional. The painting expands into space, the color as a vibratory field becomes manifest in counterposition to the monochromism; randomness, rather than order, is the goal. They are ephemeral sculptures that exhibit their spasm of life.

The most recent Brazilian contemporary art, of which Cass is part, is decisively marked by the influence of Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, and here there is a strikingly direct appropriation of the lexicon of these artists, surprisingly resulting not in an illustration, but a pastiche. Without showy maneuvers, in his economy of gestures Cass creates something fresh, without the weight of citationism heavy with knowledge and anemic in poetic singularity.

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The word *America* or *Americans* appears sometimes in the artist's work, in languages such as Italian and French. In the lyrics of a song about North Americans, Caetano Veloso wound up speaking sharply about us, South Americans:

*Americans are very statistical
They have clean gestures and clear smiles
Sparkling eyes that penetrate what they are looking at, but not into their own self
The Americans represent a great part of the happiness that exists in this world
For the Americans white is white, black is black (and the mulatto woman is something else)*

...

*And in this way they earn, bargain, get lost, give up, acquire rights
While here, down below, indefinición is the norm
And we dance with a grace whose secret is something not even I know
Between deliciousness and disgrace
Between the monstrous and the sublime
Americans are not Americans
They are old human men
Arriving, passing, passing through
They are typically Americans
Americans feel like something was lost
Something was broken, is being broken.*

Something is being broken. This is the continuous tense of the verb to break. Taking as its rudder the unavoidable deconstruction - a knowledge of loss, about

what we are losing - Rodrigo Cass's work is driven by the complexity of someone who dialogues with the past while resorting to the urgency of the present as a compass. "Here everything seems like it is still construction and is already ruin." This time - where the things are not completed, where "nothing continues," where the beginning does not imply an end where the discontinuous is the norm, where we live based on adversity - is the experience of the time of this New World, our time, which obsesses the artist, lacking a solid tradition and, therefore, brimming with possibilities for subversions.

The still very young Rodrigo Cass brushes the past against the nap, in an intense dialogue with a history of art. As previously stated, his project is ambitious, though not pedantic. There is a vivid freshness to his work. History does not serve the role of a crutch, but that of a friend with whom the artist delicately and intuitively converses. Rodrigo's flights are his own, and no one else's. And we think that this is only the beginning.

1- It is worthwhile to point out a meaning for *manifest*, important for Cass, and linked to religiosity, where "to manifest" is synonymous with "to reveal" This meaning is recurrent in biblical texts, since God is revealed in the person of Jesus. He is thus incarnated in a body. That which is spiritual, coming from another plane, is manifested in material. The communion wafer is a material manifestation of Jesus.

2- KRAUSS, Rosalind. *Passages In Modern Sculpture*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998, p.254.

3- Another important reference for Cass is the work of Eva Hesse, a representative of what we call post-minimalism. Hesse's manuality, her delicate and obsessive subversions of serial, modular structures, are part of the wellspring of sources that inform the artist's work.

4- The term "manifest" can also be thought of as that which presupposes a latent material. In the field of psychoanalysis the terms in play are crucial in order to differentiate the order of the unconscious - latent content - from what is owing to consciousness - the manifest content. Our symptoms are various sorts of overflowings of gestures, words, and acts (Freudian slips) of what is latent, kept in the unconscious. Thus, the manifest becomes an essential clue for us to access what is structural in our subjectivity, but which remains camouflaged. In the territory of aesthetics a parity between the two axes was conceived by phenomenology, a philosophical current that lends primacy to the perceptible dimension of experience - equivalent to the manifest. This primacy was, in a certain way, a response to modern philosophy which, by internalizing the truth in the subject's conscience, took the world as an object, separating it and distancing itself from it. The world thus disappeared as an exteriority but reappeared, solid and certain, as a mental experience. Phenomenology is precisely a response that lends philosophical dignity to the perceptible and seeks to undo the separation of subject versus object. Phenomenology was a decisive inspiration for the neoconcrete art movement.

5- Rosalind Krauss cited em BUCHLOH, Benjamin H. D. "Process Sculpture and Film in the Work of Richard Serra". In: SERRA, Richard. *October Files*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001. p.11.

6- See: VATTIMO, Gianni. *O fim da modernidade - niilismo e hermenêutica na cultura pós-moderna*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2002.