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by [Elisa Wouk Almino](#) on August 20, 2015



Installation view of 'Empty House, Casa Vazia' at Luhring Augustine (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

“The house was more than a skin ... an organism as alive as our own,” [Lygia Clark wrote](#) soon after making the interactive installation “A casa é o corpo: penetração, ovulação, germinação, expulsão” (“The House is the Body: penetration, ovulation, germination, expulsion”) in 1968. Encased inside a giant plastic balloon resembling a womb, the viewer entered a dark interior and brushed against soft surfaces before emerging back into the light. The home, the title of Clark’s work reminds us, acts as another vessel for our bodies.

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Installation view of Fernanda Gomes's sculptures (click to enlarge)

At the heart of the Neo-Concretist movement, which Clark helped spearhead in Brazil, was the notion that art should be physically experienced. *Empty House, Casa Vazia*, Luhring Augustine's current show in Chelsea, mixes Neo-Concrete works with Brazilian contemporary art of a similar sensibility. As co-curator Donald Johnson Montenegro told Hyperallergic, the show borrows its name from Clark's ideas, who also conceived of her forms in relation to space, or the void. The theme of "emptiness," or even the imperceptible, likewise recalls what poet Ferreira Gullar [said](#) of Neo-Concrete artworks: they're not objects, but expressions. Neo-Concretism — both a reaction to the "scientific" character of Concrete art and the military coup in 1964 — was, as Gullar [put it](#), born out of "contradiction": privileging both "mind and body, reason and sensation."

I have this image of the gallery after hours, when the sculptures hang in the actual vacant space, and I imagine them switched off, asleep. For, as Gullar, Clark, and their contemporaries believed, these works only awaken once we engage them. Upon entering *Empty House, Casa Vazia*, we're confronted with what looks like a window shutter with a messy, white paint job. Next to it, another wooden object, possibly a drawer from a desk, is turned on its side. They are lost parts, severed from their original contexts — a home, perhaps. Nearby, an iron structure by the same contemporary artist, [Fernanda Gomes](#), climbs like a tall comb, with its "teeth" meeting the wall, except some of them are almost imperceptibly too short, leaving a hint of space. Gomes's sculptures seem to be in a continual state of attaching to and detaching from something else.

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Hélio Oiticica, “Relevo Espacial 6” (1959, constructed 1991), painted wood (click to enlarge)

Just across the room dangles one of [Hélio Oiticica](#)’s “spatial reliefs,” “Relevo Espacial 6” (1959) — a form that wishes to disassociate itself completely from its surroundings. Two strings keep this pair of bright-orange, imperfect squares, which taper like binders and create dark cavities in their folds, suspended in space. The work predates and foreshadows Oiticica’s *parangolés*, where his colorful shapes became malleable and wearable. In Gullar’s words, they were “the dance of form in space.”

There is, as Montenegro and co-curator Lucrecia Zappi put it, something musical about the works on view. Though highly geometric, they are flexible and rhythmic — for instance, [Lygia Pape](#)’s black-and-white wall sculptures that fold onto themselves and create smaller squares and triangles that you could imagine unfurling and spreading like an Oiticica. Called “Livro da noite e dia” (“Book of Night and Day”) (1963/76), the wooden sculptures are puzzles of shapes that come together and apart, sliding over and beneath one another. Like a book, the forms open and close, and move between light and darkness.

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Amilcar de Castro, “Untitled” (circa 1990), 140 sculptures of Corten steel

In the back room, on rows of shelves, 140 steel sculptures by [Amilcar de Castro](#) bend and contort, evoking stories of books come to life. Smaller versions of all the sculptures he ever made, the work (circa 1990) was one of de Castro’s last. Often resting on a thin edge, the winding, crescent, rectangular, and triangular shapes are paper-like, extending their “limbs” in single file as though each sculpture were striking a ballet pose. Having lived in Brasília, I can’t help but think of the modern city’s concave and convex lyrical architecture — buildings that seem to rise (or descend from another planet) and contort into impossible shapes while secured in place. In a more explicit reference to the city’s shapes, [Erika Verzutti](#)’s “Brasília Teatro” (“Brasília Theater”) (2014) melds two amorphous black shapes that reveal white centers like cut-open fruit.

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Rodrigo Matheus, “Em obras” (2014), iron fence, sand, and screen (click to enlarge)

The works gathered in *Empty House, Casa Vazia* create geometries, cavities, insides, and outsides not unlike buildings and houses. In the final room of the exhibition, **Rodrigo Matheus**’s “Em Obras” (“Under Construction”) (2014) towers over us: a blue screen hanging behind an iron fence which digs into a pile of sand. The work is literally “in-progress” and draws attention to how the other animated works in the show seem to be coming into being. Numerous sculptures appear to precariously balance in place — like one of **Mira Schendel**’s crumpled rice paper “little nothings” — and the lingering question of what might happen to them hangs in the air.

Aside from **Adriano Costa**’s steel carpet in the shape of “Norwegian Cheese,” there are no other works that audience members can touch (Clark’s “Bicho” can no longer be handled). However, these works rely on our participation in other ways. What Zappi said of Gomes’s sculptures applies to the other artists as well: they encourage us to “experience the work not objectively, but in a metaphysical way.”

The contemporary art on display often seamlessly integrates with the chosen Neo-Concrete work — yes, on an aesthetic level, but also on a sensory one. Alive with movement and song, we can almost hear these works converse in a common language particular to home.

Empty House, Casa Vazia continues at **Luhring Augustine** (531 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through August 28.

Adriano Costa**Amílcar de Castro****Brazil****Erika Verzutti****Fernanda Gomes****Helio Oiticica****Luhring Augustine****Lygia Clark****Lygia Pape****Mira Schendel****Neo-Concrete**