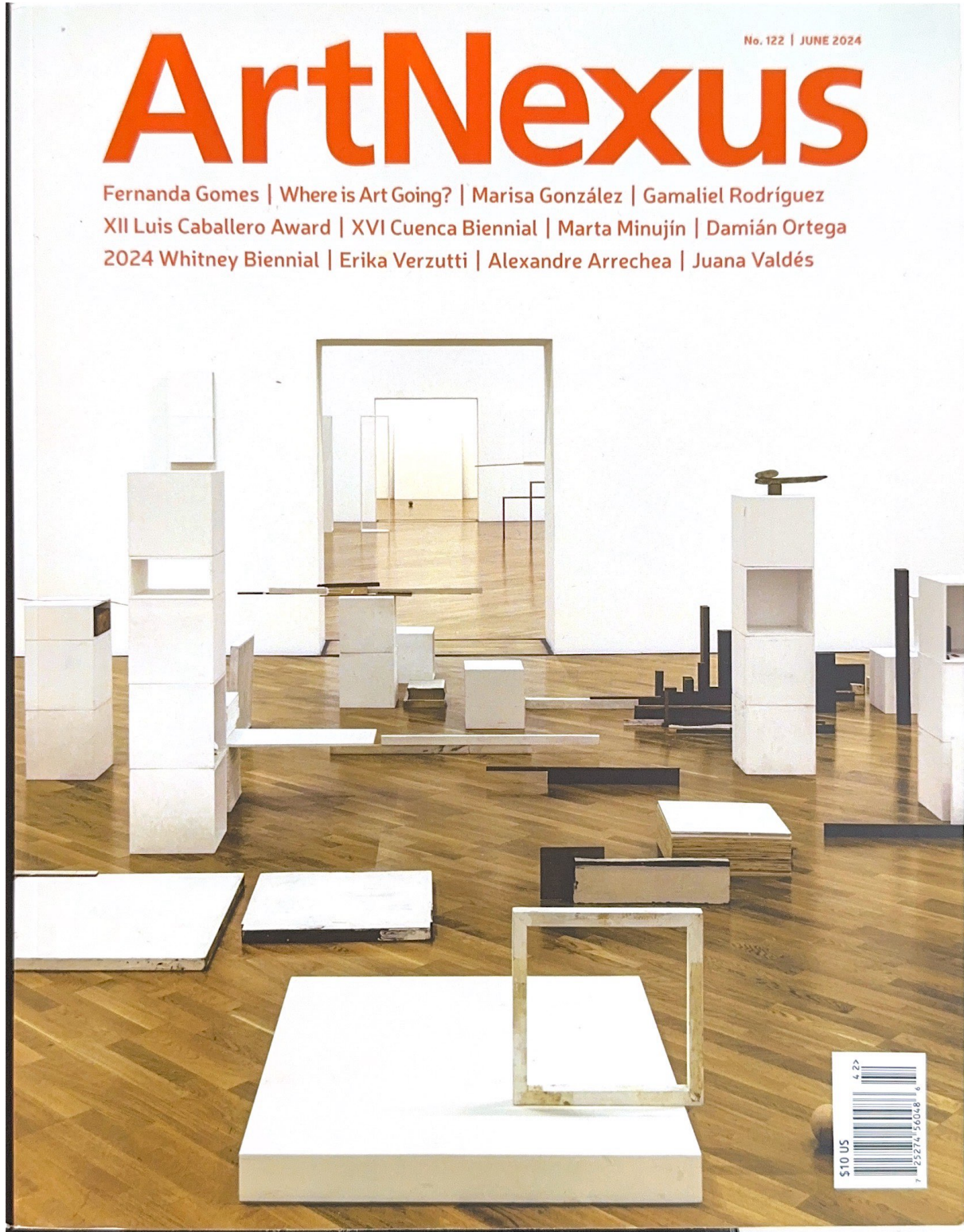


ArtNexus, June 2024, Xenia Bergman





Fernanda Gomes. View of the exhibition *Fernanda Gomes, Pinacoteca de São Paulo, Brazil 2019 – 2020*.

XENIA BERGMAN

This unique artist moves with minimal gestures. Hers is an art of archaic characteristics. Ever since her first exhibitions in 1988—at the Galeria Macunaíma, at Funarte, and the Museu do Açude—she has understood that the extreme synthesis of her works leads her to require extra care in assembling works of “maximum lightness.” (1) An activity she has always felt the need to do “alone,” in order to explore particularities, types of backgrounds, and light sources for each situation. One of her most important operations is to conceive and install her exhibitions—as a result of time, discipline, and observation—in a way that makes them habitable. A *punctum* in open space: fluid, transitory, contradictory, and alive.

The works of Fernanda Gomes (1960) are, by definition, an encounter with the oblique and with estrangement. “Enigmatic visions,” says the artist. Presentations of “things” rather than objects. And there’s a certain inclination towards the white, opaque, raw, rough, naked material. Since she insists on silence, we get a sense of where that maximum lightness and deepening of the surface is taking us. Other times, her works are more like provocations; as in 1993, when she extended an extremely long line in a chaotic

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weave occupying the empty pool of the palace that houses the Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage. A glamorous school that formed a generation of artists who returned to painting, happenings, and neo-Dada, or the so-called "eighties generation," which she definitely opposes, seeking instead to be its antithesis.

In 1994, when she made her debut at the 22nd São Paulo Biennial, whose theme was the explosion of matter, she fit in perfectly with her diaphanous abstractions: structures woven with hair, cigarette papers, and even some interventions carried out *in situ* by extracting objects from a suitcase, like a magician, or modeling reliefs from wall imperfections, which were cut out and removed at the end of the exhibition, as a decantation of a unique experience in such an important event.

After her triumph at the Biennial, Fernanda Gomes began traveling with a kind of portable atelier. She exhibited in *Selection Brazil* at the Drawing Center in New York and had exhibitions in Switzerland and Berlin. When invited to the 13th Istanbul Biennial, she felt inspired by the Hagia Sophia's large dome and its eloquent lighting system through its upper windows, connecting the ancient world with the Middle Ages. Her first intervention took place in an apparently empty room with

subtle interferences on the wall; transgressions in extreme antimaterial, which also marked one of the most important changes in her career. From then on, the works would no longer be isolated but integrated into the void and in exhibition spaces that need not be white cubes. This aggregating to the space led her to question concepts such as *site-specific*, which now seemed to be diluting into a new dynamic: "The exhibition is a concentrated moment in a continuous movement," Gomes concludes.

The artist then organized a solo exhibition in New York's Joseph Hellman Gallery, titled *Small Objects*, an excellent synthesis of her work, which involved "leaving a very precise distance between things." Around that time, Gomes began to deal with galleries in London, a city that the artist has drawn attention to since 1997, joining Brazilian artists such as Jacqueline Leirner and Rivane Neuenschwander.

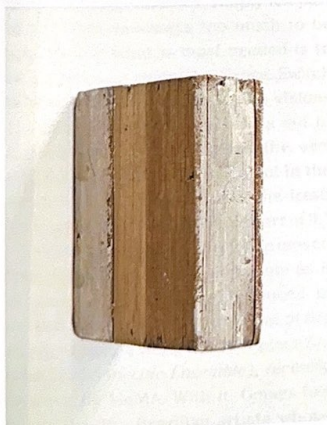
The turn of the millennium gave her the opportunity, ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, to produce the exhibition titled *Zeitsweden* at the Kunstmuseum Bonn in Germany. The artist arranged books, pillows, mattresses in different tonalities of white, and aromatic herbs, where people could walk, recline, or freely explore the room illuminated with overhead light. A year later, this travel-

ing exhibition won the IV Scipione Prize in Macerata, Italy. At the Kunstmuseum Bonn in Vienna, *Zeitwenden* was installed inside a wooden room covered with a flexible, white fabric to filter the light. In the Fridericianum Museum in Kassel, the core of her exhibition *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth) consisted of a table perpendicular to the open window, on which a piece of paper, folded and tied with a thread, moved with the action of the wind.

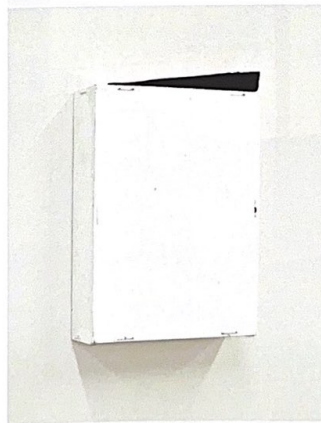
In 2001, Gomes participated in the important group exhibition *Da adversidade vivemos* (On Adversity We Thrive) at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and which counted with a text by Anna Dezeuze. On this occasion, as in an optical game between the wooden floor and the pallets covering it, she combined elements such as brushes, ink, cubes, and small reliefs. In 2003, for *Structure of Survival*, the segment curated by Carlos Basualdo in the 50th Venice Biennale, she intervened the Arsenale with an installation integrating the inside, the door, and the outside.

In 2006, she exhibited in the Museo Patio Herreriano de Arte Contemporáneo Español in Valladolid by appropriating the chapel of the imposing medieval building with solar reflections and external incidences in the internal space layouts.

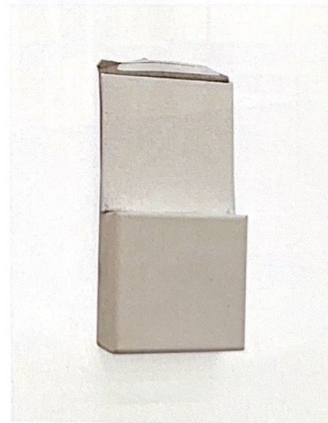
Fernanda Gomes. *Untitled*, 2010. Wood and paint. $7 \frac{7}{32} \times 1 \frac{27}{64} \times 4 \frac{23}{34}$ in. (18 x 4 x 12 cm). Approx. Alison Jaques gallery



Fernanda Gomes. *Untitled*, 2013. Wood, metal and paint. $7 \frac{7}{8} \times 5 \frac{33}{64} \times 1 \frac{13}{16}$ in. (20 x 14 x 3 cm). Approx. Alison Jaques gallery



Fernanda Gomes. *Untitled*, 2013. Canvas, cardboard, wood and paint. $8 \frac{27}{32} \times 3 \frac{15}{16} \times 1 \frac{49}{64}$ in. (22 x 10 x 4.5 cm). Approx. Alison Jaques gallery



That same year, for her solo show at the Luisa Strina gallery, she wrote a statement that reveals her concern for the individualized experience: "(...) every day we can recover affection and memory through things; find living perspectives of realities; a game open to any imaginable connection; the participation of those who are interested is simple and immediate. Please do not touch: silence is the ideal companion."

At the end of the decade, in 2008, she presented another large individual exhibition, this time in Matadero, Madrid. The show gave a feeling of emptiness. The space revealed smoke stains on the illuminated walls, and scattered on the floor were several tiny, almost invisible objects: two sugar cubes and some art materials, such as acrylic plates and drawings. For this occasion, she launched a catalog with photographs, texts, and a design of her own.

Shortly after, Fernanda Gomes presented a seminal independent production in Brazil. Made with minimal resources, the exhibition occupied the 1,800 m² of the main room on the second floor of the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de

Janeiro (MAM). The works germinating in her atelier-studio were transferred to the large exhibition hall. The empty/occupied space gained unusual prominence facing the museum's large windows. From the compositional point of view, she considered the obscurity of the cement floor as background and its cracks and imperfections as coordinates of a hypothetical matrix that was prefigured in space. The scheme-plot-drawing matrix was unifying in the same way as the neoplasticism professed by Mondrian and translated to Van Doesburg's graphics (where the right angles of objects arranged on walls, floor, and ceiling must be modular and seek their formal equivalences). Furthermore, from an emotional point of view, the use of panels, podiums, and objects with signs activated the memory of earlier days, when she worked as a photographer in the *Corpo e Som* (Body and Sound) Department of the MAM, and then as a graphic designer, between 1978 and 1983. She also studied the group show *Transparências* (Transparencies), where objects, glasses, wires, crystals, and wood were organized to create effects of volumetry and luminosity by opposing distances, and linear and

orthogonal shapes, creating chiaroscuro from the encounter of rough or polished white objects, and offering contrasts with natural wood. The dynamic created between architecture, things organized with unsurpassed precision, and the viewer reached a full realization of form. After the inauguration, the artist designed an atelier-room adjacent to the exhibition hall to care for the works and adjust the show's contours and lighting.

In 2012, Gomes participated in the 30th São Paulo Biennial, curated by Luis Pérez Oramas and dedicated to Bispo de Rosário, the mythical primitive artist, who influenced various artists throughout Brazil with his obsessive art. Once again, she presented the structure that she had explored in 2000 and that had reappeared in the collective *This is Art*: the cubicle, whose lighting occurs in a punctual and highly sophisticated manner using halogen lamps: a type of light that makes a direct impact in order to control the shadows and contours of the coexisting objects. The refined vision-purifying room also encouraged the viewer to circulate around the hallway that separated the room from the win-

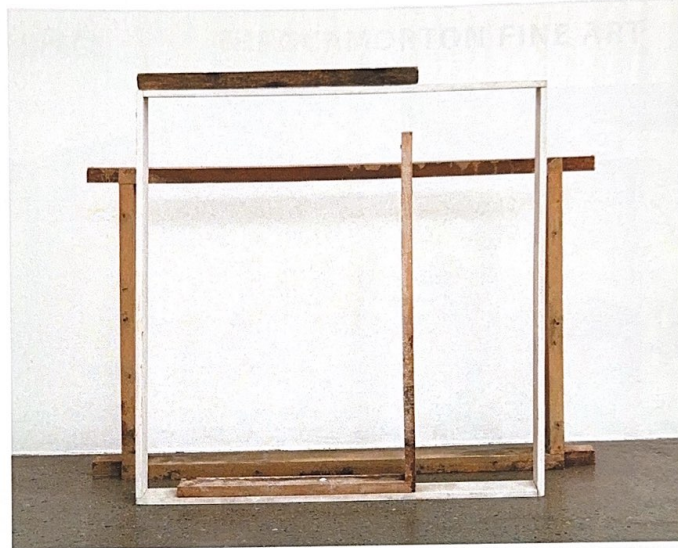
Fernanda Gomes. *Untitled*, 2019. Paper, color and wood. 236 7/32 x 236 7/32 x 35 53/64 (600 x 600 x 91 cm).
Installation view, *Fernanda Gomes*, Vienna Secession, Vienna, Austria, April 12 - June 16, 2019.
Photo: ©Peter Mochi. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich / Paris



dow, creating the complexity to sustain Merleau-Ponty's decree: "I perceive, therefore I am." The continuous presence of small discoveries also confabulated with the idea and the concept of aura, (2) or as she prefers to call it, autonomy: "Many works perfectly dispense with my presence. They only need good light and some space. But I have the feeling that I'm just getting started and that the best is yet to come. I'm starting to make sets that can be traced with built light and space."

Gomes was invited to occupy the eclectic building that houses the Casa Cultural Laura Alvim at the heart of Rio. As usual, she not only modulated the space to highlight its neutrality but also opened the window facing the sea to let the sounds and the sunlight in. And so, the landscape—from the sand of Ipanema Beach to the horizon of the Cagarras Islands—was extended to the exhibition wall, expanding the space to create "infinite and predictable possibilities." Likewise, the display cases and various objects extracted from warehouses, those shadowy and shifting areas, speak of an exhibition that arrived empty-handed. This method will be repeated in other venues. In a room of this exhibition, plastic bags floated freely in space as a possible allusion to the sound and the presences on the beach and in the street. To the swaying of the wind, a visitor may have felt abstracted in fractions of a second by the allusive ecosystem of one of the most famous beaches in the world and, faced with such nuances, simply felt part of it. "There is always too much to be said, even if what is most needed is to be in silence. In complete silence. Switch to visual language to think with visions of concrete things. Leave words out of it. Aside from all this, just breathe, see, and move around; then, when out in the street, see things again with the fresh feeling that this is art. A simple part of it."

In the Luisa Strina gallery, she moved once again to the exhibition room as if to a temporary atelier, and produced, in response to the disputed survival of the autonomy of the work, her 2017 piece *Untitled (Light Specific Ensemble)*, recently acquired by MoMA. With it, Gomes has joined the fifty Brazilian artists whose



Fernanda Gomes. *Untitled*, 2017. Wood, paint and nails. 24 4/5 x 31 1/2 x 4 7/10 in. (63 x 80 x 12 cm).
Luisa Strina gallery, São Paulo

Fernanda Gomes. View of the exhibition *Untitled*, Luisa Strina gallery, São Paulo, 2017. Diverse materials.
Variable dimensions





Fernanda Gomes. View of the exhibition Museo Jumex, Mexico, 2018

works are part of the museum's permanent collection.

Shortly after, she intervened in important spaces such as the Alison Jacques Gallery in London (2017), and before in Galerie Peter Kilchmann in Zurich (2015), where she modified her *mise-en-scène* with small sculptures and a large ping-pong board.

At the Museo Jumex in Mexico City in 2018, the artist created a new niche: penetrable and surrounded by a space where external light filtered through the very white silk curtains. Every movement adds something in her labyrinthine compounds. Everything helps to pixelate and calibrate the light. Reliefs, swellings, or the *punctum* within an atmospheric

halo transmit inevitably magnetizing and absorbing perceptual layers. The work's aura, safeguarded in the act of exhibition, but which Walter Benjamin considered to be endangered, here, on the contrary, is very present. Inside one of those modules, we feel the fullness of white. It is as if each point in the surrounding space were at a precise distance from the observer's vision, just as if we entered a camera obscura or Lewis Carroll's looking glass. Any trivial aspect becomes inconsequential on its own. This new register and display of habitable spaces also recall Duchamp's concept of the work of art as a *rendezvous*: a resource that contemporary artists often use as a strategy and method (3). Assuming that,

at a certain arbitrary time of day, the first object within reach will be transformed into a ready-made within her habitable niches, Fernanda Gomes invites us to a great *rendezvous d'art* that reconfigures the manner in which the work must be seen and consummated, paving the way for a personal desire: the autonomy of the artwork as both utopian and immaterial.

NOTES

1. The quotes gathered here are statements uttered by the artist in parallel with the making of her exhibitions. See the artist's dossier, updated in 2023.

2. See Xenia Bergman, "Fernanda Gomes in the Luisa Strina Gallery," *ArtNexus* No. 108. March-May, 2018.

3. This Duchampian concept was used by Nicolas Bourriaud in his *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Presses du réel, 2002).

XENIA BERGMAN
Art critic