

The White Issue (Color Theory), 1997-99, digitally manipulated photograph; source: Italian Vogue, May 1997

Color Theory

Denise Carvalho

Color Theory was the title of Odili Donald Odita's first New York solo exhibition held at Florence Lynch Gallery from October 16 to November 14. New paintings, mixed media works and digitally manipulated photographs investigated the relationship between aesthetic traditions and cultural codes through the language of colors. Born in Enugu, Nigeria, and brought to America by his parents when he was only six months old, right after the Biafran war, Odita was raised in the Midwest assimilating important aspects of postmodern America, its myths and cultural languages, from art to the movies and advertising. With an educated African background, he came to live through the tension and psychological devastation of being reduced to being black in a country that defines identity according to race. The artist's strong sense of Nigerian identity was kept alive by family traditions, through stories told by his parents, in the collection of African art and artifacts in his home, and through a constant reminding of his roots. With an art historian for a father, Odita grew up reflect-

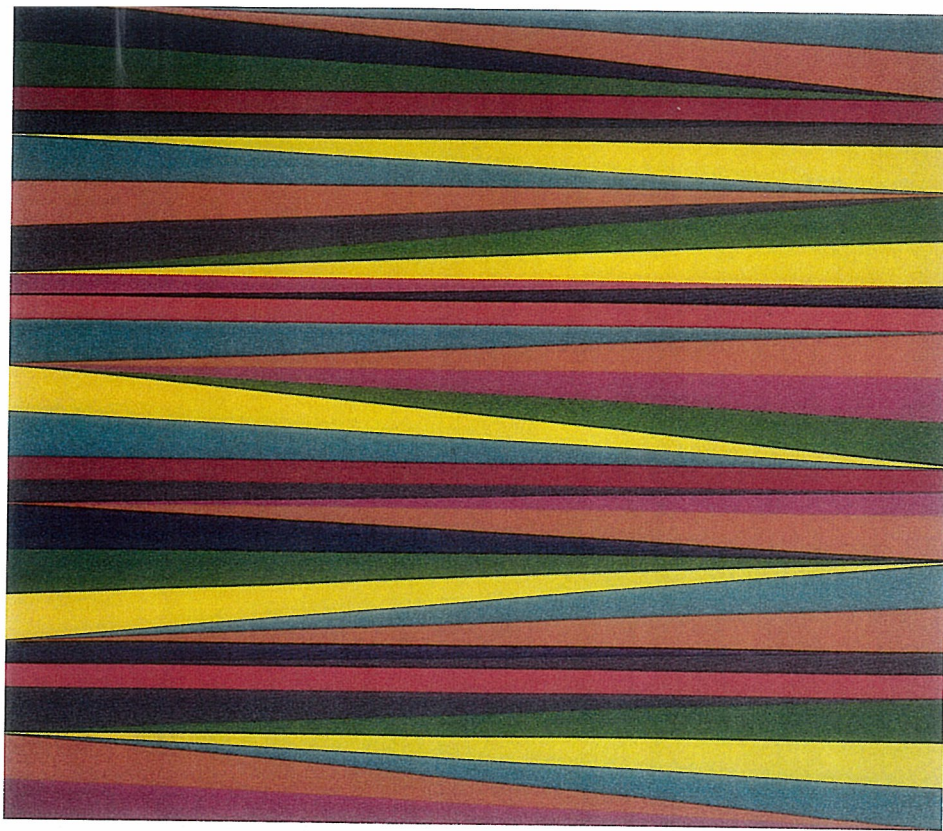
ing upon two separate layers of aesthetic understanding, one academic, the other instinctive, one intrinsic in his birth language and roots, the other adopted and learned through everyday culture, forming the relationship between ideology of aesthetics and identity of space, which would become an important aspect of his work. Racial and ethnic codes were fundamental signifiers for the artist's perception of identity, intensified by a massive and growing distribution and generalization of these codes throughout media-cultures.

Odita's work took an important turn when he moved to New York in the early 1990s. The intensity of the city's fast-paced energy, its hypnotic architecture of the spectacle with lights and giant billboards, with mobile ads passing by on buses or through the trends of people, did not spare any one from its gaze. The city of many cultures crammed together was able to keep each culture distinct in language and tradition. The assimilation of this separateness shared into the same space, or the conceiving of different but integrated spaces, or even a hybridization of the image are perhaps the most important aspects of his work. Its process and concept combine a variety of

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Black as a Negative Space (1997-99), is a digitally manipulated photograph of a typical fashion magazine scene with three models posing for a shot. The picture also depicts a black silhouette, which stands out in relation to the soft background. The cutout or negative space of the photo, here scanned into a much larger size, reflects the influences of advertising and commerce, of cut and paste strategies in the substituting and selling of cultural information, and the obliteration of a "negative" identity, the identity of the other. The pattern, represented by repetitive codes such as the similarities in the appearance of the models, or other strategies of control is one of the many hegemonic schemes utilized by adver-



The Speed of Life, 1999, acrylic on canvas 72" x 84"

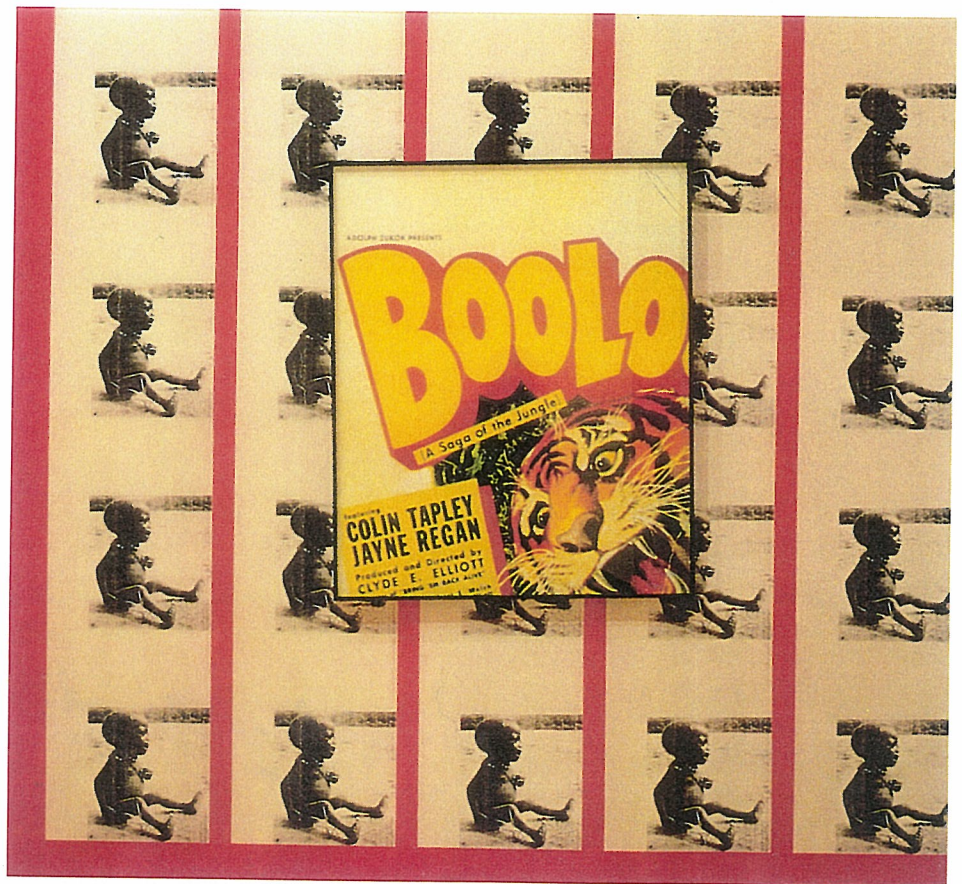
tising to promote a simplification in our comprehension of identity. Most recently, the advertising industries have produced a more heterogeneous set of codes, mixing different races and ethnicities in a trendy and appealing look. Although New York's giant billboards promote a growing cross-cultural diversity, is this really a sign of an empirical support for multi-culturalism in the States, or is it part of a greater campaign, the one that spreads Western codes throughout the world? The negative or altered space of Odita's piece is the one whose identity is not represented here, the outer edge of a group, the periphery. A similar idea although focusing more on the confrontation with the viewer is the work entitled *The White Issue* (1997-99). Made in a similar fashion of the former, "The White Issue" depicts the front cover of *Vogue*, with a model in front of a landscape which colors could be reminiscent of the reddish-brown tones of African soil. Here, the artist continues to emphasize the metaphors schemed by consumerism inviting the viewer to reflect upon its aesthetic and illusive aspect, the opulence of visual satisfaction of other lands and other realities camouflaged by the luscious artifices of advertising. The frightening aspect implied by Odita's work is not only the inculcating of unimaginative aesthetic codes by the fashion industry, but the apathy of the viewer in their assimilation and consumption. To be allured by these

codes is also to endure a voyeuristic act of admiration for the altered image represented by a pattern. This alienation and generalization of sexuality disguised through the language of fashion and hegemonically articulated through the advertising industry is not lesser a strategy of manipulation and

control over individual sexuality than the pornographic industry's images. It also forms a clear link between sexual nihilism and porn's billion dollar economy.

Odita's paintings depicting diagonal layers of vivid colors such as *Present Tense*, *The Speed of Life*, *Pan-Am*, and *Open*, all from 1999, deal with more than just structure and rhythm. They represent the aesthetic struggle between form and concept; or more specifically, the dynamics of the aesthetic process against the immediate influences of the psycho-social. These layers of colorful bliss are the bright lights of the spectacle translated into space. Odita's paintings contain contradictions in relation to more conceptual works, among them *The White Issue* and *Black as a Negative Space*. The paintings have a feminine, almost lyrical quality evoked by the horizontal lines, and a distance from the concept, although this is clearly present in the limits of each color. The layers as conductors of color and light cross the canvas on a continuous flow, in a decentralized web of possibilities separated only by space. In these paintings, Donald Odita permeates an opening experience of escape and laughter, a trance into colors and space.

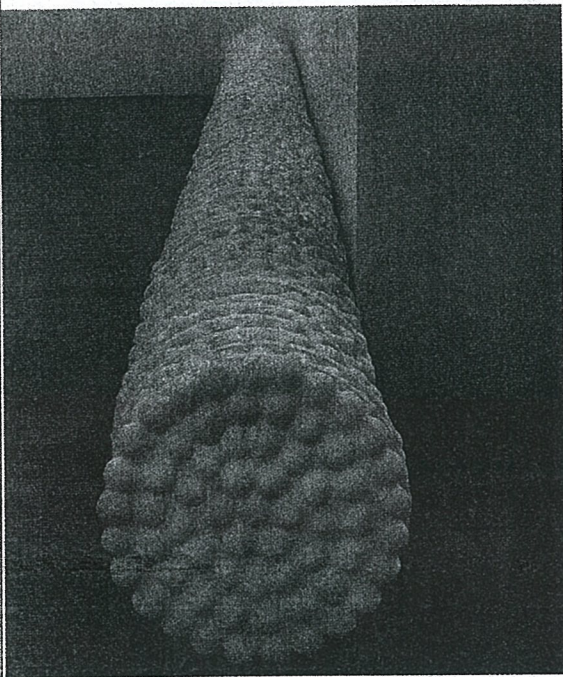
Denise Carvalho is an art critic and independent curator based in New York



Erotic Invisible Empires, 1999, mixed media on wall 59.5" x 67"

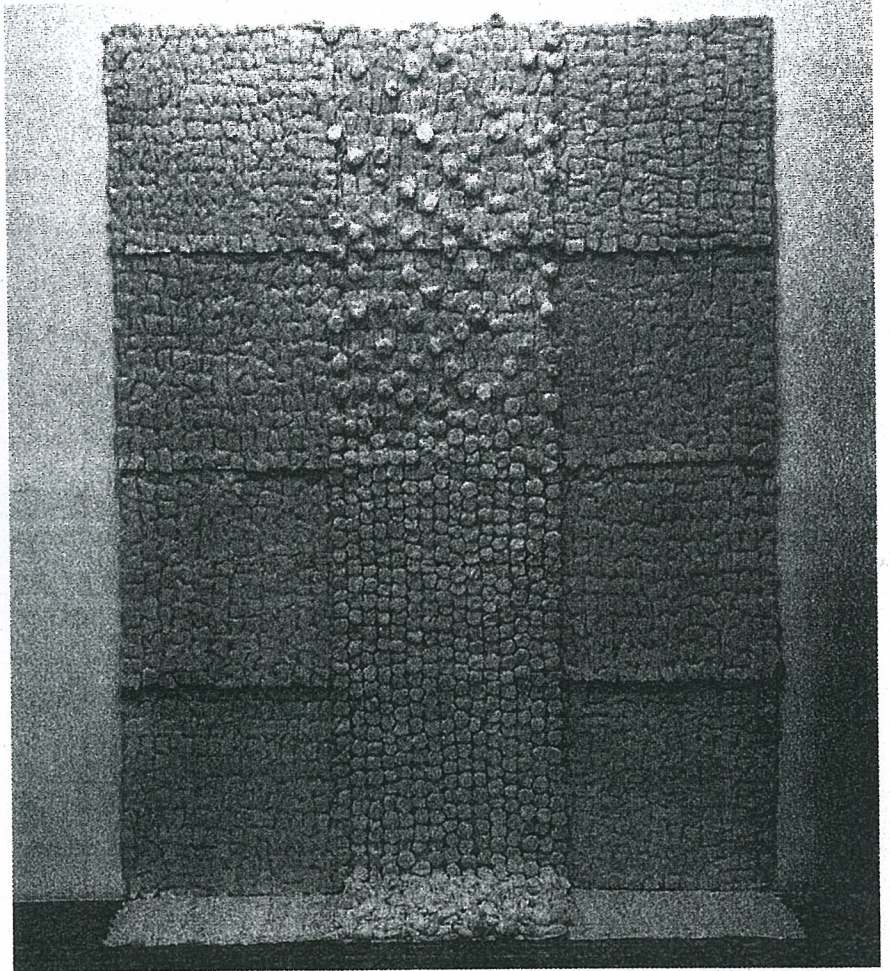
Robin Hill: Between the Physical and the Invisible

by Denise Carvalho



“Multiplying the Variations,” Robin Hill’s recent exhibition at Lennon-Weinberg in New York City, attempted to create a dialogue between two very distinct environmental influences—New York and California. A native of New York, where she lived for 25 years, Hill drew her aesthetic interests from the city’s energies, contrasting vertical architecture and the excesses of information technology with the subjective experiences of everyday life. Through her more recent California experience she has taken a fresh look at the psychodynamics between urban and rural, exploring anonymity and invisibility in light of spatial vastness, architectural flatness, and a sense of time as stagnant. Her large installations consist of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of fragments that culminate in sculptural situations, demonstrating distinct relationships between materials.

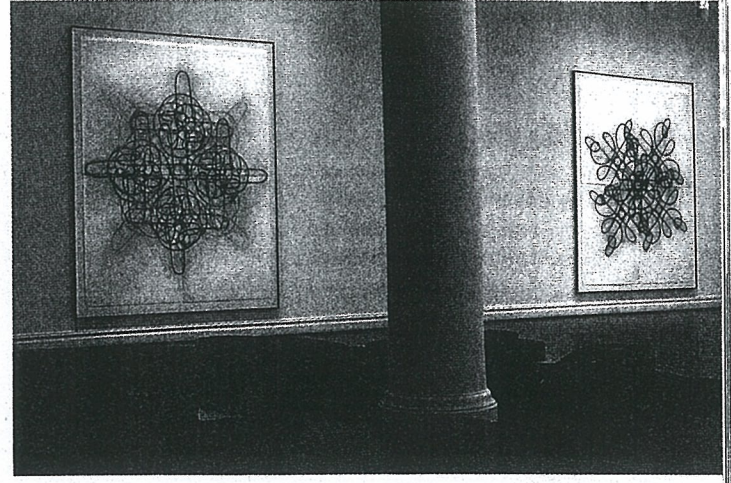
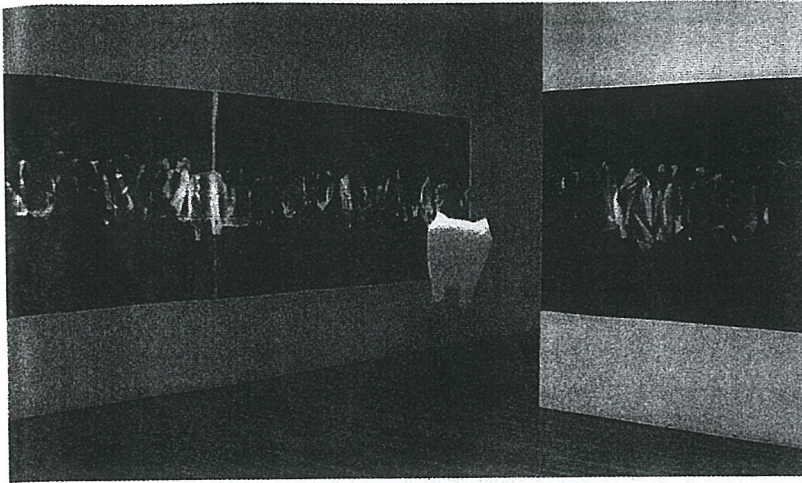
Hill’s obsession with the potential of form in space is at the core of her project. While the concrete aspect of her



work is expressed through monochromatic colors and massive, repetitive objects, the conceptual tendencies are centered in subtle, playful, and sometimes lyrical relationships of form and language. The move to California forced Hill to reconcile the old with the new. The process of adapting to her new environment has been based on shaping sensitivities to “what is there as opposed to what is not there.” The sense of vastness in the California landscape is important in relation to the notion of absence. This quality resonates in Hill’s work through the relationship between materiality and poetic

Left: *Concretion*, 2004. Hydrocal, 100 elements, 10 x 10 x 182 in. Right: *Dissipation*, 2004. Cotton batting and paper, 95 x 24 x 70.5 in.

language, which parallels ideas of containment and dispersion. California reflects the constant negotiation between two realities: the agrarian lifestyle envisioned by Thomas Jefferson and the industrial and technological development tied to property values and corporate control. Belonging is thus fused to ownership, as well as to the ambiguities of one’s perception of having and letting go.



Left: 100 Ft. of the Sweet Everyday, 2001. Cyanotype on paper, helium balloons, and polyethylene bags, 5 x 100 ft. Right: Blue Lines, 1995. Plaster, pigment, and oil stick on wax paper, dimensions variable.

Hill is attached to the potentiality of materials, whether they are found, purchased, or inherited. She describes her scavenging in the streets and factories of New York as if the sought-after objects were “on the verge of extinction.” Coveting “the found” in rural California involves a sense of distance and contingency in relation to the objects or situations at hand, sometimes forcing the artist to negotiate beyond what she has bargained for. In imagining an intervention with a visually stunning, uprooted walnut orchard seen from her car window, Hill had to consider photography for the first time.

For Hill, chance phenomena are always connected to hands-on creative production. She says, “I’d like to think that the work I am making was already here and that I have just facilitated its visibility.” Her work is concerned with the idea of economy and resourcefulness, and the will to “embrace small as big, simple as complex, low-end as high-end, accidental as purposeful, and incidental as noteworthy.”

Hill often refers to an important writer on the subject of chance, Lewis Hyde, who observes that “what a lucky find reveals first is neither cosmos nor chaos, but the mind of the finder.” *Bushwick Wheel* (1998), Hill’s first foray into the territory of chance, is a bed of orange peels resulting from just such an encounter. Her process con-

sisted of collecting the peels on a daily basis from a person who sold bags of peeled oranges in the streets of Brooklyn. The spontaneous collaboration between the two individuals, one needing to acquire a material that the other needed to dispose of, yields yet another layer of meaning.

“Multiplying the Variations” takes its title from Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*: The exhibition consisted of six large-scale works, all of which explore the relationship between the visible and the invisible, the invented and the found. In *Concretion* (2004), a horizontal column made of 100 Hydrocal castings from a companion wax piece lies on the floor and invades the path of the viewer. *Against the Wall* (2004) is a 10-foot-square grid of nine-inch plywood disks that support approximately 70 hand-formed balls of wax. Obsession in art can mean many things. For Hill, it means making similar forms over and over again, but never actually repeating them. Repetition without replication situates her work in complete and ironic opposition to mass production. Each unit is essential—fragment and whole simultaneously. The resulting composition reflects the anonymous potentialities of every act and thought in the artist’s studio. *Dissipation* (2004) is a large grid of shredded cotton batting on which hundreds of two-inch hand-formed disks rise from an accumulation on the floor. Made from the leftover off-cuttings from a shoulder pad factory near Hill’s former Brooklyn studio, it resembles a cascade of water or a mantle of lace. The interest in an industrial process on

the verge of obsolescence connects *Dissipation* with earlier works such as *Pressed Azaleas* (1973), in which Hill employed the diazo blueprint process to reveal dimensions of found objects not visible with the naked eye.

Hill is engaged in a dialogue between drawing and sculpture. In many of her works, three-dimensional form and line are interdependent. Objects distinct in their volume, weight, and color are elegantly united with their two-dimensional counterparts. She is fascinated with circular, arabesque-like, and spiral shapes displayed as objects or inscriptions, symmetrically or asymmetrically, as if they represented thresholds between physical and invisible spaces. *100 Ft. of the Sweet Everyday* (2001), made with cyanotype on paper, plastic bags, and helium balloons, occupies all four walls and the ceiling of the space in which it is installed. The elements of this installation organize the space with photogram images of ordinary plastic bags in a linear chain-like formation that flows continuously from wall to wall, capturing the feeling of permanence in architecture and “the word” as raw form. The idea is to break the boundaries of containment and permanence, bringing art to a situation of play, of openness and change, somewhere between the poetics of language and physical phenomena. Hill observes, “In a way, I feel that my work is approaching a desire, a longing for being on the edge between the physical and the invisible.”

Denise Carvalho is a lecturer, art critic, and independent curator.

Body Extensions: Angela Freiberger

by Denise Carvalho

Brazilian artist Angela Freiberger creates sculptures that celebrate past and present, tradition and contemporaneity. Using marble from Italy and Portugal, she sculpts “receptacles” or “recipients” as she calls them in her native Portuguese. Her urinals, washbasins, bathtubs, vessels, and bowls are reminiscent of Greek and Roman funerary vessels. In their treatment, they are smooth and uniform, with little oxidation, nearly pure.

The contemporary side of Freiberger’s work begins with the atmosphere surrounding its making, a marble factory where builders and stonecutters, not artists, prepare and cut the stones. Using traditional sculpting techniques, she blends machines with the chisel, countering the noise, dust, and sweat of the factory with the detailed precision and smoothness of her work and mixing a worker’s mood with what she sees as a female sensibility. This sensibility is extended to her vessels, which are “receptacles” for her own body.

Freiberger began to make these objects in the early 1990s, and her

immediate concern was to create lightness in marble by substituting negative space for positive sculptural matter. As her interaction with the work developed, she emphasized the relation between sculpture and performance, using her own body as a mold. Her vessels, plates, washbasins, and bowls were all taken from casts of her body—her back, stomach, and head, for instance. Other works, made as replicas of utilitarian objects such as bathtubs, bidets, or urinals, contain signature marks of the artist’s hands, fingers, or toes imprinted on the stone.

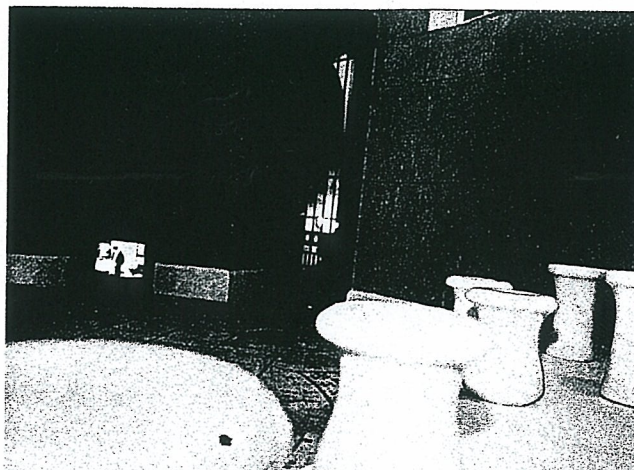
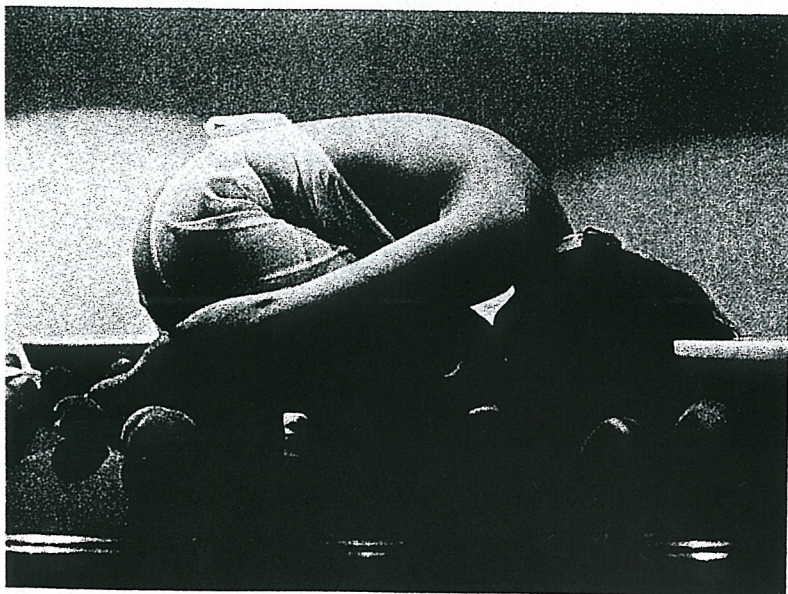
By mixing ancient and contemporary processes and ideas, she follows what has long been seen as a signature of Brazilian art—adapting foreign influences to local conditions, redefining sources into an international art par excellence. Masculine archetypes such as overt rationality, excessive organization, and symmetry—a Constructivist influence rooted in Brazilian art since the late 1950s—are replaced with feminine archetypes such as smoothness and roundness, though still sustaining cohesiveness and attention to detail.

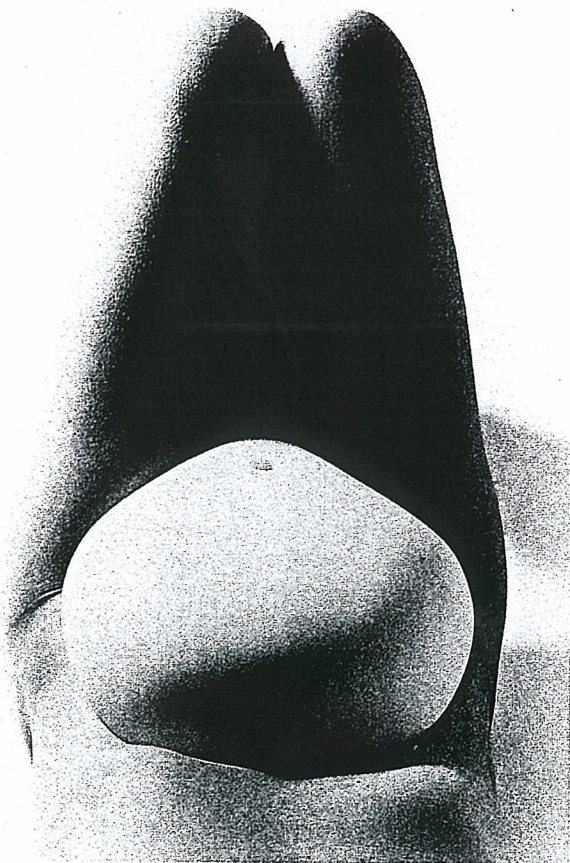
Since the interactive works of Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark (1960s), Brazilian sculpture has been connected to the body of the viewer or to that of the artist. In Freiberger’s case, a connection to the body’s performance is implicit, even when the piece stands alone in the gallery. In her work, both the process and the finished piece are shaped by anachronistic historical influences leading to a synthesized finished object. She reverses the process of much Brazilian art, which begins with a clear framework and ends in organized chaos.

Freiberger’s vessels link sculpture, architecture, and performance. Her connection with architectural space begins with her awareness of the viewer. Although the sculptures are extensions of the body, they appear frozen in space. There is an ambiguity between stillness (which usually suggests a balanced weight, a gravitational point of axis) and lightness (movement). The performing body here is not necessarily moving: more often it is frozen like a snapshot, a positive element to the negative forms of the receptacles.

In the Carrara marble pieces *Woman Washing her Soul*, *Woman Carrying the Place of her Head*, *Woman Carrying the Place of her Fingers*, and *Man Ray’s Violin* (all 1999), Freiberger

Left: *The Banquet*, 2002. Performance with marble sculptures.
Below: *Collection of Urinals*, 2001. Marble and video, installation view.





connects sculpture and performance. Photography here serves a purely documentary role, though it questions the very reason of the performance, its source of action and immediacy, making us wonder whether the stillness in the snapshot actually takes away the performance's most vital significance—its subjective interaction with the viewer. It is possible that the need for photo documentation determined the nature of the performance, with the stillness in the performer's body a way to simplify reception both for the lens and the viewer.

Lavabo da Alma (1999) is a large washbowl created as an inverted form of the artist's stomach, with circular forms or spirals engraved inside that reference the earthworks of Robert Smithson. According to Freiburger, the relationship to Smithson suggests the female body as ultimately connected to nature, a concept that still prevails in Latin American culture. For instance, in the works of Ana Mendieta, the artist's body becomes an extension of waterfalls, grass, mud, and other natural materials. In this way, the female body symbolizes life and death. Similarly in Freiburger's work, the physical condition of the marble, its purity or higher level of oxidation, leading to fragmentation or sedimentation, reveals a constant

negotiation between opposing natural forces.

The installation *Bath House* (2001) consists of a bathtub, a bidet, and a large bowl for washing the feet. While the bathing woman has provided subject matter for many artists, from Degas to Picasso, in Freiburger's work, the presence of the woman is transitory. In her absence there is death, violence, loneliness, and abuse. This relationship between life and death is underscored by the placement of marble vessels and other ritualistic objects in large rooms to emphasize a sense of emptiness and abandonment after the brief appearances of a performing body. Performances such as *Sora* (1998), in which the artist bathes with I.V. drops of cranberry juice, suggest the ambiguous relationship between pleasure and pain.

Collection of Urinals (2001), an installation shown at Rio de Janeiro's Centro Cultural Oduvaldo Vianna Filho in 2002, featured marble urinals inspired by a scene in Luchino Visconti's *The Leopard* (*Il Gattopardo*, 1963). Freiburger re-creates the bathroom set, filled with Roman-style urinals, next to a monitor, where the movie clip is replayed. In the scene, the Prince of Salina, played by Burt Lancaster, senses death approaching and seeks refuge in the bathroom of his mansion during a ball celebrating

Left: *Woman with Stone Vest*, 1999. Carrara marble and human body, 30 x 40 cm. **Right:** *Lavabo da Alma*, 1999. Carrara marble, 33 x 27 x 10 cm.

the engagement of his aristocrat nephew and the *nouveaux riche* daughter of a merchant. In the gallery, the viewer replays the part of Salina by entering through the door.

Freiburger's performance *O Banquete* (*The Banquet*, 2002) was also inspired by film. Marco Ferreri's *La Grande Bouffe* (1973) and Luis Buñuel's *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) treat the act of eating as a subversion of moralistic rules. In Freiburger's performance, a model dressed in a voile apron kneels on a large table, as if she were herself a dish, surrounded by large marble plates and peaches. Spectators around the table participate by "eating with their eyes." After 20 minutes, the performer stands up, picks up the peaches, and offers them to the viewers. The sensuous game of hunting and being hunted with the eyes, of desiring and being desired, is also the game of the arts. The spectator eats without possessing, whether the goal is an art object or a woman's body.

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ART PAPERS

SAO PAULO, BRAZIL

By Denise Carvalho

Is "disarranged within constraints" a new definition of Brazilian art? After traveling to eleven cities and meeting with more than one hundred artists, curator Gerardo Mosquera realized that in Brazilian art, constructive tendencies still frame their own subversion.

DISARRANGED—PANORAMA 2003 OF BRAZILIAN ART (*Museum of Modern Art São Paulo, October 16—November 30, 2003*) examines this realization and highlights Brazilian art's unique fusion of organic and concrete elements, which attempts to surpass conceptual and material boundaries. Though it has been known for "anthropophagizing" elements from Pop to Minimalism and Conceptual art since the 1960s, Brazilian art also has kept its Neo-Concrete framework as an identification of what it does best: creating something anew from local and foreign influences, something Mosquera calls "an international art language par excellence."

Surprisingly, Mosquera discovered that states outside Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo also produce strong contemporary art. **Adriano and Fernando Guimarães**, brothers from Brasília, created two performances mixing minimalism with Samuel Beckett's sense of abyss in the most mundane things. *Respiração+* and *Respiração-* (2002) are 35-second plays without actors and words. These performances about breathing reveal that power controls even the most basic needs and acts. Although the brothers are quite young, their work also reflects both the oppressive legacy of the 1960s dictatorship and today's fast but less than liberating urban experience.

Also applying art to immediate social situations, Fortaleza's **José Guedes** created a video project for an intervention in the city of São Paulo, showing a truck painting pedestrian crosswalks on one of its busiest streets. São Paulo is known for its constantly jammed traffic, with no place for pedestrians. The project obviously was not approved, and the artist decided to create a smaller version on the street entering the museum.



Alex Villar, *Other Spaces, 1997-98, fire alarm* (courtesy Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo).

Using the original longilinear architecture of the museum, something earlier curators often changed, Mosquera kept his strategy close to the constructive theme, balancing disarranging tendencies in the concept of the works with a clean, simple approach to placement and lighting. Established artist **Cildo Meireles** and less known **Umberto Costa Barros**, for example, both created dialogue between art and architecture, articulating form and perception over function. Based on Jorge Luis Borges' *El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan*, the symmetric lines of Meireles' *Descala (De-cent)* (2002) are that of a wooden ladder infinitely ascending, in a continuous assembling and disassembling of form and meaning. Costa Barros' site-specific *Lugar (Place)* (2003) had several stools chaotically suspended on top of each other, held by pieces of chalk. This sense of impending chaos of things on the verge of change is something experienced daily in Brazilian culture.

Contrary to the fragility of time depicted by Meireles and Barros, **Alex Villar's** work deals with New York City's oppressive architecture. *Other Spaces* (1997/8) shows the artist's body as a negative extension of the marginalized urban space. Documented as photographs, these interventions depict the body as a sculptural element of architecture, disarranging it or being shaped by it.

More anthropological than sociological, **Vik Muniz's** photographs mix formal and informal documentation. Muniz is known for his photographic work with organic effects reached by using materials such as chocolate, powder, cotton, wire, sugar, peanut butter and jelly. *The Sarzedo Drawings* (2002), conceived during a trip to the Brazilian Southeast,

allude to the large drawings of ancient civilizations such as the Nazca. On dry areas, the artist made large earth drawings of objects like a key, a pipe, a tooth and a sock, and photographed them from a helicopter. With maquettes made in his studio, he perfected the images.

In the same room are the works of two other Brazilian artists, **Jose Damasceno** and **José Patricio**. Damasceno deconstructs materials and concepts, disarranging and reinventing systems. *Motim* (1998—2003), in contrast to Damasceno's analytic game, Patricio's *Duzentos e oitenta dominós (Two hundred and eighty dominos)* (2000) is mathematically precise; a geometric mandala made of dominos.

José Leonilson's poetic works in fabrics, sculptures and drawings add new identity to Northeastern crafts. His drawings portray his loneliness in his struggle against AIDS. Meaning and metaphor are intimately autobiographical and are linked to the subject of desire. Leonilson's work becomes simpler, paler and more converged around himself as he approaches his death. The seven minimal drawings Leonilson made with his AIDS-infected blood for *O Perigoso (Dangerous)* (1992) convey a profound melancholy.

Other artists from Brazil, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain and Argentina also participated, and the strong international presence emphasizes Brazilian art's continued susceptibility to other cultures.