

O
b
j
e
c
t
s
T
h
i
n
k
i
n
g

Adam Szymczyk

The exhibition by Leonor Antunes at Kunsthalle Basel in 2013, titled “the last days in chimalistac,” was the first comprehensive presentation of the Portuguese artist’s sculptural works in Switzerland. Though several of the works on view had already been shown elsewhere in different configurations, others were made especially for our show; together they were integrated into one installation that encompassed the entire ground floor of the Kunsthalle.

The show’s title, as well as the image used for the accompanying poster and invitation card, indirectly introduced one of the hidden protagonists of the exhibition. Chimalistac is a neighborhood in Mexico City, just south of the city center. And it is where the Cuban-born furniture and interior designer Clara Porset (1895–1981) spent the last years of her life. Porset studied at Black Mountain College in North Carolina with Josef Albers (1888–1976); the latter famously came to teach in the United States after the German Bauhaus was brought to an end by the Nazis, first in Dessau in 1932, and then, after a short-lived attempt to revive it, in Berlin in 1933. At Black Mountain,

Porset would become a lifelong friend of Albers and his wife, Anni. Opposing the reactionary politics of Fulgencio Batista's military regime in Cuba in the 1930s, Porset went to work in Mexico in 1935, and found herself at home there in the extremely creative international cultural milieu consisting of exiles and Mexicans, all of whom were driven by ideas of social progress. She returned to Cuba during the revolution in 1959 and, after four years, came back to Mexico to dedicate herself to teaching design, espousing the integration of popular crafts, local forms, and natural materials into the vocabulary and practice of International Modernism's design principles.

The radical social and political stances taken by a number of (mostly) female twentieth-century designers and architects—among them Porset, Anni Albers (1899–1994), the Irish designer and architect Eileen Grey (1878–1976), and Lina Bo Bardi (1914–1992), the Italian architect who began working in Brazil in 1946—are a constant source of inspiration for Antunes's practice, as is the dedication of their fully accomplished lives to thinking through and making objects. In Antunes's work, the appropriation or re-editing of the lasting forms and objects created by previous generations of female artists and designers serves as a technique of study. Antunes's methods often involve the simple measuring of forms and materials, as well as their visual and haptic perception, which lead her to a reverse application of this gathered knowledge about the source objects in the process of making her new (though echoing) sculptures.

More generally, Antunes's works result from a meditative investigation into the function, fact, and meaning of everyday objects, and a steady contemplation of the forms of modernism. In her thinking through such objects, shapes, and materials, Antunes attempts to reconstruct their inner logic, as well as to bring to light the politics that once made them possible and necessary. Indeed, if reflection itself can be embodied, then it might be possible to imagine Antunes's sculptures

as "thinking objects," in that they are the loci of encounter between the original intention of the designer or architect who once brought them to life, and the inquiring mind of the artist. Indeed, it is the artist Antunes who first unmakes the objects in order to comprehend the principles of their construction, and then reassembles and modifies them as they turn into sculptures.

Antunes's exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel was organized as a meandering, free passage through several distinctive works that created their own architecture within the neoclassical walls of the space. Screens built of oak wood and leather partitioned the first gallery; a regular pattern made of lines of gilded wire was strung across a wall in the second. The fourth gallery featured an installation consisting of several remakes of the patterns in Anni Albers's famous wall hangings (woven on a jacquard loom by Albers, rendered in brass wire by Antunes). Finally, in the fifth gallery the floor was laid with leather pieces, some of which echoed the pattern of tiles on the terrace of Robert Mallet-Stevens's modernist villa at Rue Mallet-Stevens in Paris. Here too one found Antunes's sculptural representation of a simple grid, borrowed from an architectural detail of the São Paulo building previously known as the Centro de Lazer Fábrica da Pompéia (the Pompéia Factory Leisure Center), now known as SESC Pompéia, and designed by Bo Bardi herself.

Many of Antunes's works possess a striking, seemingly fragile linearity. Consider the three groups of suspended sculptures that were installed in the first gallery at Kunsthalle Basel; the works were made of parts as different as interlaced and knotted strings, riveted leather straps, bands of cotton thread hand-woven on a loom, and thin pieces of brass wire joined with tiny rings and hooks. Sagging and floating in the air, rotating or just slightly moving in airflows caused by the visitors' movements, the works are all meticulously assembled of many light parts made of disparate materials, rather than carved or

modeled in one solid or soft material. At once defying the gravity that pulls them down and making that pull apparent, the sculptures were hung from three different arrangements of rectangular oak wood frames, themselves suspended from hemp ropes under the skylight windows that span the full length of the gallery in three sections. Thus did the wooden frames serve as an intermediate structure between the geometric grid of the skylight construction and the organic arrangement of suspended sculptures that were divided into three "rooms," each corresponding to the three sections of the skylight itself. In a later gallery, Antunes's series of eleven brass nets based on the intricate latticed structures of Anni Albers's woven wall hangings were hung casually on brass railings. Other works, installed elsewhere, were standing or lying on the floor; these pieces often display a planarity, built as they are out of flat, rectangular swaths of material, reminiscent of screens, curtains, carpets, and nets, and interwoven or sewn together along the edges.

Despite their similar airiness, gravitational pull, and accumulated structures, these three groups of sculptures are variously modeled on horse harnesses (another echo: when in Mexico, Porset collaborated with, among others, the architect and designer Luis Barragán, who famously loved to ride horses); nets made of thin black cotton thread and decorative objects made of tiny wooden sticks, the latter made by indigenous people in the Amazonas (with whom the artist communicates by email, occasionally doubting the authenticity of their crafted objects); and the Portuguese fishing nets native to the artist's first home in Lisbon. The production of these functional objects is rooted in the transfer of specific knowledge between cultures and generations, which involves continuity as well as its opposite—discontinuity and loss—as cultures vanish and knowledge falls into obsolescence.

In classical sculpture, material is shaped, modeled, carved, or cast to produce a solid volume and continuous surface that changes the object's appearance when seen from different vantage points as the viewer changes position around the body of the sculpture. Such sculptural work is defined by gravity and tectonics; in Greek, *tektonikos* is a word that relates to the practice of a builder. But through the twentieth century, and beginning already with the nineteenth-century Italian sculptor Medardo Rosso, a different way of understanding sculpture came to the fore. First, surface gained in importance: it became unquiet and intricate, giving in to an almost impressionistic play of light and shadows. Second, the closed body of sculpture that was once defined in terms of volume and mass suddenly opened up and became a space that could be considered as an architectural composition of open volumes, planes, and lines, changing over the time of experience and involving the viewer's movement in space.

This was the subject of an important 1931 treatise by the Polish constructivist artist Katarzyna Kobro, who was born in Moscow in 1898 and died in Łódź in 1951. Titled "Composition of Space: Calculations of Spatio-Temporal Rhythm," the essay proposed that modern sculpture and architecture should be considered as two co-extensive fields, a concerted investigation of space and time. During that period, many avant-garde sculptors in various countries were experimenting with these new notions of sculpture, introducing movement and striving to reduce the weight of material in their sculptural works. One might mention the suspended sculptures of Alexander Rodchenko; the flying apparatus called "Letatlin" that was designed by Vladimir Tatlin; and, later on, the mobile sculptures of Alexander Calder. In Brazil, Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica redefined the condition of sculpture not only formally but also in terms of its social function and modes of use, introducing impermanent sculptures made of cloth and other light materials that could be worn like capes,

penetrated like rooms, and used as performance props such as flags and color backdrops. Finally, the lattice sculptures from the series "Reticulárea," made of steel and aluminum wires by the Hamburg-born, Venezuelan sculptor Gertrud Goldschmidt, better known as Gego, can be quoted as examples of dematerialized sculpture newly defying the force of gravity. In the work of Gego in particular, sculpture fully became a line, a form of drawing in space, taking hold of the entire space as a meshwork. In Europe, similar concerns inspired the work of Edward Krasinski, the Polish sculptor who had a show at Kunsthalle Basel in 1996. His sculptures often took the shape of materialized lines, suspended in space, creeping across the floor or rising from their pedestals; instead of stone or metal, his preferred materials were ropes, cables, and wires.

These are some of the traditions from which Leonor Antunes's work gleans and grows. Nevertheless, if "referencing" in contemporary art has become the plague of the last decade, the various movements of modernism, in particular, have been plumbed as an all-too-easily available resource, from which many artists working today quote motifs and forms without adding any substantial reflection or content. At its origins, however, modernism was anti-formalist and anti-bourgeois, a movement in the arts that strove to improve conditions of those members of society who were deprived of access to culture in both urban and rural contexts. In particular, the female representatives of the International Modernist movement remained faithful to the ideals defined in the 1920s and 1930s: art as means to social change, with mass-produced affordable design accessible to everyone, and the right to education and women's emancipation considered fundamental. These very progressive forces that defined the modernist movement, and the social history of forms and their applications, rather than just the beauty of individual objects, is what makes modernism such a powerful resource for Antunes's own singular sculptural language. Her sculptures are

born of the observation of physical objects and materials, and the histories of their forms and functions, which lay the ground for her own contemporary work. But the choice of the original object from which to start is significant too, and here, a larger cultural moment comes into play.

In Antunes's practice, abstract forms and the sensuality of materials touched by human hands and shaped by the needs of users—no less than by the will of designers—complement each other in a casual and exact manner. The resulting works possess a great affective power, one unusual in an era characterized by the prevalence of the mediated experience of things. Antunes seeks to understand the construction principles behind the rational design that implies the process of abstraction from reality by means of reduction to geometry, and only then she returns to the practice of making. By working into the materials, getting to know their physical and aesthetic properties, and acknowledging the specific cultural histories of their makers—between the modern movement and traditional crafts—Antunes situates her own social and sculptural practice as an artist within the traditions of making and making use, and then passing (and thinking) that knowledge on.