

The Domestic Esthetics of Felipe Barbosa ● Paulo Reis

I guess I am trying to make sense of a century of political disasters and artistic breakthroughs. To drill a hole in the wall and let the sun in. I guess I am trying to understand with Marcel Duchamp was such a great artist.

Thierry de Duve¹

Duchamp's readymades personify, of course, the preposition that the artist does not invent anything, that he or she uses, manipulates, displaces, reformulates and repositions that which was offered by history. Not for this to take from the artist the power of intervening in discourse, of altering and expanding it, but only for giving up the fiction that the force comes from an autonomous being which exists out of history and ideology. The readymades propose that the artist cannot make, but only take from what already exists.

Douglas Crimp²

1 Thierry de Duve. *Kant after Duchamp*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996.

2 Douglas Crimp. *On the Museum's ruins*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2005.

The title "Domestic Esthetics" evokes the book *Homemade esthetics – observations on art and taste*, by critic Clement Greenberg.³ This is not homage, neither a criticism, but an unequivocal appropriation of the title because this is evocative of the procedures through which artist Felipe Barbosa elaborates his work. Greenberg, a strong defender of formalist art, fought desperately against the *readymades* to a point which his esthetics considerations are a last act landmark of a modern understanding of making art. After Duchamp, the modern esthetics had to be domesticated in function of the new procedures by him appointed. With the arrival of minimalism and pop art, the *readymades* triumphed categorally. The north-american critic, ideologist of a social art, already previously appointed, in a text entitled "Vanguard and Kitsch"⁴ the rupture which Duchamp provoked the very moment where he inserts the serial object as discourse.

In "Vanguard and Kitsch", Greenberg attacks the internal process of modernity and its flirtation with copy. For the critic, the contamination of *kitsch* on artist objects sounded like "decafed versions of elevated art produced for the industrial masses for a compensation to the lost of popular traditions". Greenberg's Marxist's view of contrasting the work of art to mass culture took him to the epithet of formalist, renegating all the processes of dysfunctional art on the vanguard experiences. The central question appointed by Greenberg is retaked forty years later by Hal Foster. In the text entitled "The future of an illusionist, or the contemporary artist as Cargo Cultist"⁵, Foster runs over the reasons that (post) modern art is a dialectic practice in its genesis, essence and finality.

An *a priori* clearing: the title of the cited essay alludes to two relevant aspects in the areas of social sciences in the XX century. Firstly, it borrows the title of the book by Sigmund Freud (The future of an illusionist), published in 1927, where the psychoanalyst discusses the relationships between capitalism, power, fetishism, autonomy, annulations of the superego and the manipulation of the masses. Freud alerted that the manipulation of huge masses by the Nazifascist system was creating an incontrollable monster in the heart of a civilized Europe. The "Cargo Cultist", in the second part of the title of the essay, refers to the discovery, also in the 20s, of a tribal

3 Clement Greenberg. *Homemade esthetics – observations on art and taste*. Oxford University Press.

4 Clement Greenberg. "Vanguard and kitsch". Rosenberg and White [orgs.]. *Mass Culture*. Translated by Octavio Mendes Cajado. São Paulo: Cultrix, 1973. [the title of the book appears in speechmarks and the title of the book where this article is found is in brackets].

5 Hal Foster. "The future of an ilusion, or the contemporary artists as Cargo Cultist". In *Endgame. Reference and simulation in recent painting and sculpture*. [catalogue]. Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 1986.

society in New Guinea. The confront of the emerging European capitalist society with this tribe revolutionised the paradigms of modern anthropology, and questioned the values of this society. Anthropology saw itself benefited by the “scientific” voyages promoted for the aggregation of cultural artefacts for the realisation of international fairs.

The cultural apparatus picked up on the expeditions ended up receiving the *status* of work of art, and the infection of the European vanguards by these apparatus resulted in modern art. Vanguard and kitsch blended as the anthropological apparatus – exotic – became of interest due to its formal aspect, leaving symbolism to the social sciences. Kitsch, if we take it from what Abraham Moles⁶ accepted, triumphs even before the *readymades* of Duchamp. The cultural crossbreed was central for the anthropology of Franz Boas on the vanguard panorama of the 20s – his book *Primitive Art* is obligatory reading; in the modern cinema of German expressionism and of soviet realism, in the theatre of Bertolt Brecht, Artaud and Jean Cocteau; in the literature of Max Jacob, Guillame Apollinaire, Paul Eluard, André Gide, T. S. Elliot and James Joyce; in the affirmation of modern dance by the Triadic Ballet of Oskar Schlemmer; on the atonalism of Schönberg; on the definition of philosophy of language by Husserl and Wittgenstein; in the politics of Max Weber, and still in the poetic strolls of Walter Benjamin and Karl Krauss. In the visual arts, Bauhaus, Neoplasticism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Constructivism settled the modernist bases through the *mixer* character.

Let's go back to Hal Foster and his discourse about postmodernity: “Now, well, as strange as it seems, the *pensée sauvage* of the Cargo Cultist is not so distant of the psychoesthetic ideas of certain modern artists. This way, a lot of basic redefinitions of modern art also imply, as the Cargo Cultist, a contradiction between the distinct forms of the object and of the elaboration of a concrete class of fetishism. For example, the cubist discovery of the tribal artefact, the Dadaist proposal of the *readymade*, the Surrealist invention of the “object of symbolic function”, and the minimalist experiment of the serial forms of images [...]”. For Foster, modernity constituted in the dialectics, whose principles – economical contradiction and fetishist objects – inform about the mediated sculpture of recent artists like Jeff Koons, Jaim Steinbach, Joel Otterson, Jon Kessler and General Idea. For the author, with effect, the works of these artists detach themselves from

6 Abraham Moles. *Kitsch*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1986.

7 Hal Foster. Op. cit.

the *readymades* and of the minimalist/pop serial objects, models which, in turn, remit to the dynamics between modern art and mass culture.

According to Foster, contradiction and fetishism in postmodern art explain what Duchamps's *readymades* put in outstanced as art. "In the context of an art gallery or a museum, the *readymades* suggested that the autonomy of the bourgeoisie is totally fetishist, in the Marxist sense (to say, the relationships between art and society, artist and public, exposes itself as relationships between works of art) as in Freudian (to say, held artist functions as compensating substitutes which uncover or deny their material reality). Even more, the *readymade* would suggest that the work of art in a capitalist society cannot deceive the status of merchandise: that our adoration of the work of art seems like our fetishism towards merchandise" [...].⁸ "This collision between autonomous art and the more conventional merchandise comes back fifty years later with Minimalist and Pop – where it is placed as a contradiction between the old subjective model of elevated art, ratified by Abstract Expressionism, and the new way of serial production, prepared by late capitalism [...]. By aiming the folding of this contradiction between art and merchandise, Minimalist and well as Pop art make of the *readymade* the emblem (in Minimalist, the industrial object; in Pop art the established image [...]).⁹ To finalise, the author declared that the contradiction between art and merchandise is part of the parcel of the dialectics of modernity and of mass culture.

The domestic esthetics of Felipe Barbosa evokes these relationships between industrial making and the intelligence of the *readymade*. All of the artist's works refer to the conceptual unfolding of the serialisation of units, unique, permanently made and remade in order to generate other objects, these yes, dysfunctional. The creation of his work starts from materials which exist in the world, in particular those which live at home: toothpicks, hammers, nails, money bills, public transport tickets, squares, books, tiles, bottle tops, levels, chairs, TV antennas, raincoats, chocolate boxes, pencils, footballs, the armour of industrial objects which reinforce the genesis of serialisation.

The unrevealing and revealing is the implicit dialects in the making of his works from the summing-up or subtraction of materials. "If such a procedure limits the variety of the constructions by him

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

created, it allows the investigation of the formal attributes which, in contempt of its marked differences of use, are shared by the appropriated objects".¹⁰ Felipe Barbosa aims to domesticate the esthetics of the spectator through subjectivity and through the way which he notices the meaning of materials and their relationships with mercantilism and their attributed values. His explanation is the non-alteration of the initial characteristics. "I do not alterate the visual capacity of an object, what I do is transform them, in a reduction process. I never think from a sculptural point of view, but from the propriety of the existing objects. I think that the essence of the work is to try not to alterate the nature of the object, because by interference, in general, one aggregates information, for the memory which the spectator has of the object will by a constituent element of the work".¹¹

Sunset is a pop exercise where the artist recreates the visual atmosphere of a sunset made out of windsurf canvas. The geometric figure of the canvas – a scalene triangle – in sequence, creates a semi-circumference, conceived as iconic of a sunset, the banal one from postcards from coastal cities. The piece warms the ambient for its chromatic use, like *The Weather Project* by Olafur Eliasson warmed up the Turbine Hall. This visual game between significant and meaning is the essence of the artist's work. Like Duchamp – a chess game was his last *readymade action* –, Felipe also has an enormous interest in games. But his interest is purely semantical and conceptual for games are, in general, physical actions derived from a Cartesian organization through mathematics or others, of the physics of the objects. *Sinuca de bico* is a modified *readymade*, where the artist reinforces the visual sense of the most important act in a snooker game, which is the final death through the bad use of plays. The suicide of the own object, a sort of no way out for the non-attentive player.

This conceptual obsession towards games – or by the objects used in games – is increasingly accentuated in his work. *Pillball* is ironic and deconstructing in the literal sense. The artist recreates a pill, made out of deconstructed footballs. This piece has conceptual parental bonds with *Pills*, by General Idea, and *Lullaby spring* by Damien Hirst. In the case of Felipe Barbosa's *pills*, the ironic reference is to the sleeping pill which can be a football game for some, and a remedy to the soporific life of others. The footballs are the main source of visual research for the making

10 Moacir dos Anjos. "Felipe Barbosa". In a catalogue of an exhibition which took place in gallery *Arte em dobro*. Rio de Janeiro, 2006.

11 Ibid.

of the "object-paintings". By using them due to their distinct forms in colour and drawing of geometric forms, the artist dismantles them appropriating himself of the hexagons existent in their initial form. This unmade geometry gives origin to new forms, recombined and making distinct appearances, from an oriental rug (*Azulejo bola*) or a Mexican mural (*Mexican patchwork*), a constructivist painting (*Plano bola*, *Tetris ball*, *Nike total blank*) or dotted (*The grid*, *Multimarcas*), a quilt (*Bolas – Zigzag quilt*) or a metric unity (*Bolas – Tabuada*). The merchandizing dynamics of the big sports products companies is that of renovation in order to not make the consumer tired. In this way the works made out of footballs are mathematical operations and can reach an infinite number of combinations, in case the artist decides to transform them into a *work in progress* operation. I evoke in these constructions the irony that fed Jeff Koons to create his *Three ball*, *50/50 tank*.

The reference to painting also appears in the works made with ties, in which the artist, by internally articulating the interest to the chromatics of pieces, sewed and united, transforms the geometric figures, asymmetrical, organic and, once more, ironic due to the deconstruction of their indices. The football's hexagon shapes and the ties are seen by the artist as minimum structures – a heritage of a minimalist thought – which can unfold into infinite combinations, whether in form, composition, or final structure. Also in *Selfshelf* appropriation is the industrial unity of vulgar. A crossarm brace is taken as an infinite unit; crossarm braces united one to another, side by side, create a repeated line which results in the object itself to which this unity was created as sustentation, transforming into something which goes beyond a shelf. As the *Quadro de nível*, o *Martelo de pregos*, a *Sala de reunião* and *Homem Bomba* result in a critical reflection.

The repetition of a minimum unity appeared initially in the *Desenhos espaciais*, made out of coloured pencils unified by their ends, the junction by the rounded end generates the own final form of the object, which repeats the initial form of its ends. Also in *Toblerones*, the triangular structure of the box of the famous chocolate, multiply their form as they are unified by their ends. This dialectic process of unification, individualisation, composition, recomposition, form and function are constructive elements that mobilize the entire making of the work of Felipe Barbosa. A Cartesian intelligence of the utilization of replication of a form from its initial form. Like the *Mórgulas*, exercises made from toothpicks, where the geometrical forms are constructed internally and externally in the aggregation of the materials unified as in a minimalist structure taken to an infinite level, the small unities, made out of toothpicks stuck one by one, are folded creating circumferences which once more are unified and end up by constructing new images. "[...] In the works presented by Felipe Barbosa, the resource to geometry has as a starting point the self-construction of the work as from the possibilities offered by any elements. Elements elected relatively randomly, but which already bring implicit suggestions for their articulation. In this

way, like a match, an umbrella, equilateral triangles or traffic signs, emerge from quantity and continuity, serving itself from descriptive geometry, which allows a figure to transform itself into another remaining the same, even with the alterations introduced by the projection. In the resource of an *a priori* mechanism to the formalisation, his work dialogues with the radical confrontation of composition and its internal relationships, operated by the minimalists. Altogether, this is not about the investment in a positive esthetics, but the search of the widening of the intervention field [...].¹²

The *Abrigos* are a series of works made out of umbrellas. In them, Felipe Barbosa goes through to the opposite of the material to awaken the conscious of the spectator by provoking a rupture with the use of the utilized material. The first one of the series, translucent, was called *Abrigo transparente*; the second one is a black shelter, and the third version, coloured, is inspired by a neoplasticist structure. If in the first two works the two immediate references would be the surrealist objects of Joan Brossa, this third version takes us to the rationalized spaces of the De Stijl movement (Neoplasticism), dialoguing with the colour palette of Piet Mondrian and with the *Casa Schroeder* of Gerrit Rietveld. What Felipe Barbosa proposes in this (de)constructed shelter of his is the questioning of function and form. "Comprehensible even by the distracted eyes, this method demonstrates how the things which own a defined form in the world can, when grouped in a given manner, constitute entirely distinct objects. And although the characteristics of these compositions are already implied in the form properties of the used unities, its construction exonerated of those things which utility knew, making them in debt only with the power of intervention of the artist".¹³

But part of the discourse of the artist is in the use of the perversion in inverting the senses of many objects ad their established types. In two experiences with video, Felipe radicalizes this thought by proposing the utilisation of the works of art in their most literal sense. In the first action, which takes place in a beach, the artist displaces a shelter made our of umbrellas, creating a sort of rolling shelter, which displaces itself imperfectly due to the instability of the material and of their own malleable form. In the video *Igloo*, the artist exercises his most radical side by setting fire to a structure made out of flammable chemical material used to lighten fireplaces. The Eskimo shelter

12 Glória Ferreira. "Máquinas de arte". Em *Cotidiano plural*. Rio de Janeiro: SESC, 2003.

13 Moacir dos Anjos. Op. cit.

points out that ice is the structure which shelters it from bad weather, but even so, this structure can burn in its whiteness. One is never safe, no matter in which shelter.

The assumed banality of objects such as office chairs, footballs, ties, tiles, matches, fireworks, coloured pencils, stuffed bears, rulers and squares, geometry or art books, turn into a conceptual matter for Felipe Barbosa. Intrigued by the apparent immobility of these, with the relationship between significant and meaning, the artists operated in the field of conceptual art as an heir of the artistic processes of Joseph Kosuth or On Kawara, but, above all, of the radical operation of Duchamp with the modified *readymades*. As Crimp advocated about the *readymades*, Felipe Barbosa creates something new from something which already exists, for the artist wishes to push the spectator away from the passive contemplative act through means of humour, after all irony is a powerful weapon in the hands of an esthetic.¹⁴ The domestic esthetics of this artist need contextualized interpretation, semantic and symbolically, with the necessity of being searched as a *topoi*, its cultural sense, spiritual and, at last, ontological. It is the answer to Gilles Deleuze's solicitation that artists insert art in the space of lived life.

14 Paulo Reis. *Mono#Cromáticos – algumas vertentes da arte contemporânea brasileira*. Braga: Galeria Mário Sequeira, 2007.