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# Konsthistorisk tidskrift

## Journal of Art History

- ▶ **The Market Value of National Cultural Heritage**  
Katarina Wadstein MacLeod **Conservation versus Thermal Comfort – Conflicting Interests? The Issue of Church Heating, Sweden c. 1918–1975** Mattias Legnér **Performing the Transformation: A Study of the Staging of Selected Exhibitions at the KwaZulu-Natal Museum during the South African Transformation** Cecilia Rodéhn **Laura Lima at Bonniers Konsthall: Aesthetic Systems as 'Ways of Worldmaking'** Kalinca Costa Söderlund »**Dansmaskiner – från Léger till Kraftwerk**«, Moderna Museet 22 januari – 27 april 2014 och »**Sleeping Beauties – Drömmar och kostymer**«, Dansmuseet 2014 Magda Sandgren

## Reflection

### Laura Lima at Bonniers Konsthall: Aesthetic Systems as 'Ways of Worldmaking' (pp. 192-199)

*Kalinca Costa Söderlund*

The work of Brazilian artist Laura Lima offers the viewer parallel realities within which it is possible to live.<sup>1</sup> Such realities often preclude the distinction between the 'real world' and the 'art world', as is apparent in *Bar/Restaurant*, *The Naked Magician* and *Choice* – exhibited from 10 September to 30 November 2014 at Bonniers Konsthall, in Stockholm.<sup>2</sup> This exhibition – curated by Sara Arrhenius with the contribution of Caroline Elgh – shows that, instead of asking ourselves 'what' is art, we should ask 'when' is art. As Lima's work suggests, the answer to the right question is: when objects operate aesthetically by establishing a referential connection with the body as cognitive apparatus and when such apparatus becomes part and parcel of that aesthetic system, it allowed to exist. Her work also proves that 'how an object or event [, or person] functions as a work [of art] explains how, through certain modes of reference, what so functions may contribute to a vision of – and to the making of – a world'.<sup>3</sup>

Similar to Nelson Goodman in his writings, Lima presents us with a method of conceiving art where the meaning of the aesthetic experience depends on our relation to the artwork and the codes and knowledge it actualises, where visual elements and the images thereof may be distinguished from their referents and end up devising their very

own meanings. It is thus possible to state that from Lima's work, as from Goodman's, springs a constructivist and relativist philosophy. Accordingly, it is fruitful to draw on Goodman's ideas to interpret what has been seen at this exhibition, albeit Lima's method was not immediately recognisable.

#### Lima's work before it begins to make worlds

Strategically placed along the imposing glass façade of the building, *Bar/Restaurant* (Fig. 1) intends to involve not only those willing to enter the museum but also those passing by. Its furniture is rather basically crafted, and it is obvious that these objects are not mass-produced ones that have been appropriated for aesthetic purposes; however, their poor ability to convey the real ambience of the catering business constitutes more a success than a failure. Supposedly, it is a victory for Lima if some of these items progressively assert their need to conceal something and leave the viewer puzzled. Yet it may not be satisfactory for her to know that the viewer may also feel he/she is walking through a simulation. Lima wants her work to elude and to confuse, and, after all, there is nothing mysterious or magical in the artificial.



beer was being drunk, or at least not fast enough to ensure perception within five minutes of viewing. Notwithstanding, the bartender (who is actually part of the aesthetic system created by Lima) moves around the tables and the viewers, pretending to be refilling them. If one walks into the piece having read some information about it, one's attention then focuses on searching for the 'trick' that allows the beer to disappear. At the gloriously crowded opening, many visitors were scrutinising the mechanism that sucks the liquid away. Textual anticipation not only increases the sense of artifice that the staged bar/restaurant conveys, but it also detracts from an absolutely sensorial approach to the piece and induces reactions that efface the artist's intention to blur the boundaries between art and magic, the real and the surreal. In order to understand this work, one must go beyond some general assumptions of the museological machine, the art critics and makers, and the audience. If one achieves this, then *Bar/Restaurant* unfolds its power and significance. By supplanting ideas on how art institutions should communicate and publish artworks, one may spontaneously reject preparatory textual explanations of Lima's aesthetic ensembles. By overriding critics' and artists' tendency to compare the intellectual dimension of the artwork with the ability that the latter's materiality has to express predefined concepts, one may then disregard the fact that extremely complex and ambitious thinking on the part of artists can, at times, preclude them from actually making good art. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, by ignoring how audiences are prone to think that the aesthetic experience is made by three constitutive yet non-interchangeable

elements, namely the artist, the work and the beholder, one may ultimately become not only part of the work but also part of the artist's thought process – therefore being, at once, viewer, artwork and artist. These are the circumstances that allow Lima's work to sophisticatedly state 'when' is art.

### The work in terms of the world and the world in terms of the work

Asserting Nelson Goodman's philosophical concept of 'implementation' of the artwork, *Bar/Restaurant* entails the idea that anything may function as art by gaining aesthetic meaning through sensorial and cognitive apprehension on behalf of viewers.<sup>4</sup> *Bar/Restaurant* begins to function when a person empathises with the work and therefore actualises its potential. However, the fact that the viewer may go beyond actively experiencing the work to enter the dimension in which he/she feels like being the latter's major component pushes the boundaries of Goodman's category. 'Implementation' assumes further implications when the viewer, beyond making an aesthetic phenomenon out of what he/she sees, includes his/her own body, senses and mind in the aesthetic experience.

Upon protracted participation and committed reflection by its human constitutive part, what could otherwise be simply an intelligent yet baffling putting together of things gradually acquires 'the language of art'. The latter, as Goodman advocated, entails that:

aesthetic experience is dynamic rather than static. It involves making delicate discriminations and discerning subtle relationships, identifying symbol systems and characters within these systems and what these characters denote and exemplify, interpreting works and reorganizing the world in terms

of works and works in terms of the world. Much of our experience and many of our skills are brought to bear and may be transformed by the encounter. The aesthetic 'attitude' is restless, searching, testing – is [...] creation and re-creation.<sup>5</sup>

Lima's work may transform the experience and skills of its beholder, who in return may understand 'the language of art' to the extent in which he/she recognises himself/herself as a character within the identified system, thus beginning to consciously abandon the condition of beholder and join that of the work's world.

While human beings progressively set a sort of fusalional relationship with chairs, tables, beer and other items, a swapping of object and subject occurs within the aesthetic experience. All those things put together in *Bar/Restaurant* lose their denotative meaning to become symbols, thus moving away from their condition of ideally being props with which art may be made to embody the status of art itself. If we begin to think that artworks not only belong to their own worlds but may also symbolise the world, art then not only objectifies things belonging to the world but is itself also an object of the world – albeit an aesthetic one. This leads to the conclusion that, whilst object and subject exchange places within Lima's work, our cognitive relationship to both art and the world is challenged: our restlessness placated only when our minds reach the conclusion that art is one of the world's fundamental components and vice versa.

### The work, new worlds and conflicting worlds

It has surfaced from conversations with visitors that becoming part of *Bar/Restaurant* may generate, beyond feelings of absorption, a

sense of uncomfortable objectification. Even if certain opinions heard at the exhibition indicate an overbearing aesthetic experience, it is undeniable that Lima cannot set the domain of her symbol systems without giving authority to the beholder. When such authority becomes conscious, *Bar/Restaurant* is transformed in a tool with which we may master several worlds: the one of Lima's vision; the one we make through her work and world; that which overlaps hers and/or our own worlds made through her work and the so-called 'real world'; and so forth. The realisation of our agency may thus disappropriate Lima of hers and reveal to us that we all engage with what Goodman called 'ways of worldmaking'.<sup>6</sup> The most disconcerting world one may envision is the one in which, if art is sitting down to have a drink and mingle then art is, in fact, human kind. Such a world takes place by analogy when one thinks that, given that people are part of the material world, they may swap places with art as any other existing thing: flesh and bone are, after all, as substantial as wood and metal. Precisely when one's perception allows art to function like human beings, as much as human beings function like art, *Bar/Restaurant* suddenly puts forward the question: 'Are humans setting their investigatory gaze on art, or is art observing humans walking around and within it?' In other words: 'Who/what is generating the analysis and who/what is being analysed?'

Experiencing such world implies that human beings may be susceptible to the investigating qualities of art. For, as absurd as this world might sound, Goodman's ideas on fiction as metaphorical truth will show that it is indeed possible. In Goodman's own words:

fiction, [...] whether written or painted or acted, applies truly neither to nothing nor to diaphanous possible worlds but, albeit

metaphorically, to actual worlds. [...]he merely possible – so far as admissible at all – lies within the actual, so we might say here [...] that the so-called possible worlds of fiction lie within actual worlds. Fiction operates in actual worlds in much the same way as nonfiction. [...]Artworks] take and unmake and remake and retake familiar worlds, recasting them in remarkable and sometimes recondite but eventually recognizable – that is re-cognizable – ways.<sup>7</sup>

Accordingly, Lima's work re-elaborates worlds so drastically that we may conclude the following: those dimensions generated through aesthetic experience can be reorganised to the highly fictional, yet re-cognisable, extent in which art is able to speculate the nature of reality as much as human beings do. In *Bar/Restaurant*, anthropomorphic art as fiction applies

metaphorically to the 'real world'; it lies within the actual worlds we make – and, within all these worlds, it operates as much as non-fiction. Artworks that articulate a theory of multiple worlds unavoidably engender conflicts between worlds. Thus, it is necessary to remember that the given sense of truth of one world may not apply to another, and that, if we insist on doing so, we must consider that 'truth is often inapplicable, is seldom sufficient, and must sometimes give way to competing criteria'.<sup>8</sup> Further, the more we expand our views on worldmaking through *Bar/Restaurant*, the more we realise that 'the distinction between true and false falls far short of marking the general distinction between right and wrong versions' of worlds.<sup>9</sup>



Fig. 2. View of »The Naked Magician«. Photography: Per Kristiansen/Bonniers Konsthall (2014). Licensed by Creative Commons (CC By 3.0), <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.

## Living worlds from that of the wizard

The exhibition has been planned in a way that leads the visitors to pass through *Bar/Restaurant* before entering into the circus-like curtained area that accommodates *The Naked Magician* (Fig. 2). If *Bar/Restaurant* suggests to us that Lima thinks like a magician (given that she is constantly doing ‘tricks’, eliciting the improbable, dreamlike, uncanny and even the absurd to those who become part of her work), this work makes us believe that the magician behaves like Lima.

In this dramatic looking pavilion, where tall shelves loaded with jumble drift randomly upwards contradicting logic and defying gravity, it becomes immediately clear that the character of the magician serves a specific purpose: he/she in fact emulates an artist and laboriously meditates, organises and creates – increasingly transforming the infinite amount of trifles that chaotically overload the huge place from floor to ceiling. Suddenly, the pavilion’s mess also recalls an artist’s studio. The rationale unfolds even further if one notices that the magician’s tailcoat has sleeves cut right below the armpits. This shortening may stand for a thwarted illusionistic practice (as the magician has lost a strategic place for hiding tricks), yet it also indicates the fact that an artist, as opposed to a magician, cannot dissimulate and that the artist’s work must be endowed with gifts which go far beyond dexterity, stratagem, craft and cunning.<sup>10</sup> The magician operates within the work in ways that mirror Lima’s expectations in relation to her repertoire, which are to activate our cognitive apparatus and trigger in our minds new ways of perceiving the real – or what may be parallel to it.

The magician constantly interacts with the world he/she inhabits, namely, all that

profusion of ‘stuff’ and each human being entering the system, and, whilst he/she makes more or less visible alterations, our judgement unfolds its layers as if it were a hand of cards. The more we go back to the artwork (either an hour or so or a few days later), the more we notice the game that transforms what there is left to be perceived and what we make of it. Our cognitive response is therefore under a constant push; the magician seems to be playing poker with us, and each of his/her moves leads our judgement cards to render unpredictable worlds that complement the previous and the next ones, while also belonging to the dynamic world of the artwork itself. Whilst we notice that, for instance, the magician begins to draw, the music that is playing in the background sounds unexpectedly different to our auditory realm. Such difference, in return, precipitates yet another visual appraisal of the magician, the act of drawing and any of the thousand items scattered in space. This is understandable if we consider that:

the forms and feelings of music are by no means all confined to sound; many patterns and emotions, shapes, contrasts, rhymes, and rhythms are common to the auditory and the visual and often to the tactual and the kinaesthetic as well. A poem, a painting, and a piano sonata [...] may thus have effects transcending its own medium.<sup>11</sup>

Suddenly, we feel that there is a world in which hearing is affected by seeing; immediately after we are in another one where seeing affects hearing; as soon as we reach both conclusions they immediately belong to a third world where both phenomena occur concomitantly.

## Fabricating facts

*Choice* invites us to walk into its pitch-dark domain as long as we are prepared not to

share what we experience within it with the outside world. I cannot describe what I felt, touched and barely saw in there; however, trying to answer the following questions raised by Goodman may give the reader an idea of what this work conveys:

‘Can’t you see what’s before you?’ [...] the illuminating answer [...] is] ‘That depends...’. One thing it depends on is the answer to another question: ‘Well, what’s before me?’ [...], and I must confess that the answer to this, too, is ‘That depends...’, and one thing it depends on heavily is the answer to still another question: ‘What do you make of it?’<sup>12</sup>

I should also be entitled to share those questions I asked myself once I walked out of *Choice*: ‘May we fabricate the notion of »nothing« from that of »something«?’ ‘May we fabricate the experience of »oblivion« from that of »awareness«?’ These uncertainties point to the ‘fabrication of facts’ that has ‘the virtue of [...] irritating those fundamentalists who know very well that facts are found not made, that facts constitute the one and only real world, and knowledge consists of believing the facts’.<sup>13</sup> Is our fabrication of ‘absence’ from the experience of ‘presence’ a token for falsehood or fiction, and therefore the fact of actually experiencing ‘absence’ a token for truth? The answer *Choice* proposes is: ‘no’, because even if ‘we must distinguish falsehood and fiction from truth and fact; [...] we cannot [...] do it on the ground that fiction is fabricated and fact found’.<sup>14</sup> *Choice* advocates that the identification of the physical with the real and of the perceptual with the merely apparent is not the sole identification for both; facts and fiction are both fabrications and can be used to describe a world or contribute to the making of one; what we see in phenomenal and perceptual terms does not always correspond to what we see in physical terms, and

such modalities of seeing are highly independent – although they may be conjoined and/or resulted from one another.

Nothing is certain in that world we all share and live in; we may only attempt to know what our understanding of such a real yet phantom world is about. If we say that Jorge’s and Maria’s experiences of *Choice* are different versions of the same fact, we must ask not what this fact is ‘but rather how such phrases as »versions of the same fact« or »descriptions of the same world« are to be understood’.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps, the only shortcut to be taken to avoid this fundamental reflection would be that ‘facts are, after all, obviously factitious’.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, our understanding of reality has its ‘greater common divisors’, however, while looking at a piece of iron a clerk at the post office might say that he/she sees a solid block of shiny metallic material, whereas a physicist may advocate that what he/she himself and the clerk are looking at is, actually, a swarm of molecules made of atomic particles revolving around a nucleus. If an artist then joins the group, he/she might add that it is undeniable that the piece of iron is neither a piece of iron nor a conjunction of molecules, but it is an abstract sculpture. Here we are facing three people with three world versions, and we are all able to fabricate versions which work equally as fictional, factual and factitious depending on the perspective chosen to understand them.

*Choice* states that worlds are possible even by means of an artwork that, if not dismissed, becomes far more than merely a pitch-dark cave. If the conclusions that entering *Choice* brought about are added to all those we have reached by experiencing, or even being *Bar/Restaurant* and *The Naked Magician*, Lima’s work then irrevocably leads us to agree with

one of Goodman's major theses, which states as follows:

the arts must be taken no less seriously than the sciences as modes of discovery, creation, and enlargement of knowledge in the broad sense of advancement of the understanding, and thus that the philosophy of art should be conceived as an integral part of meta-physics and epistemology.<sup>17</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Laura Lima was born in 1971, in Governador Valadares (MG). She lives and works in Rio de Janeiro, where she co-founded the artist-run gallery A Gentil Carioca.
2. All the works at this exhibition have been previously shown: *Bar/Restaurant* and *The Naked Magician* in Switzerland at Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst (2013); *The Naked Magician* and *Choice* in Brazil at the Casa França Brasil (2010/11). An early version of *Bar/Restaurant*, named *Casal 3*, was also shown in Rio de Janeiro at A Gentil Carioca in 2010.
3. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Hassocks, 1978, p. 70.
4. According to Goodman's 'implementation', if a painting has been painted yet also kept hidden or if it is used as a table cloth, its execution has not been upgraded to the condition of work of art. On the contrary, an industrially produced object, such as a bottle holder or something existing in itself in the world, like a tree branch or a stone, may become a work of art if its condition is implemented by somebody who experiences it aesthetically. See Goodman, 1978, and Noéli Ramme, »'Instauração': Um Conceito na Filosofia de Goodman«, in: *Revista Arte & Ensaios*, n. 15, Rio de Janeiro, Editora PPGA-EBA/UFRI, 2007, pp. 92–97.
5. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, New York, 1968, pp. 241–242.
6. See Goodman, 1978.
7. Goodman, 1978, p. 104.
8. Goodman, 1978, p. 107.
9. Goodman, 1978, p. 109.
10. Sara Arrhenius stated that the magician's 'sleeveless tailcoat mak[es] it impossible for him to hide any cards up

the sleeves'. Sara Arrhenius, »Secrets and Magic Tricks«, in: *Bonniers Konsthall Exhibition Journal*, No 7, 2014, p. 8.

11. Goodman, 1978, p. 106.
12. Goodman, 1978, p. 91.
13. Goodman, 1978, p. 91.
14. Goodman, 1978, p. 91.
15. Goodman, 1978, p. 93.
16. Goodman, 1978, p. 93.
17. Goodman, 1978, p. 102.

## Summary

Laura Lima's exhibition at Bonniers Konsthall (September/November 2014), in Stockholm, both offers an understanding and triggers interpretations of the claims central to Nelson Goodman's philosophy: (1) anything becomes art when operating aesthetically; (2) aesthetic experience results from the »implementation« of what has the potential of being art; and (3) art is a »way of worldmaking«. Whilst *Bar/Restaurant*, *The Naked Magician* and *Choice* incorporate the viewer and unfold their individual yet interconnected meanings, they also prove Goodman's vision of art as creator of knowledge and his positioning of aesthetics within the realms of metaphysics and epistemology to be right.

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