



**Poéticas esculturais em  
*Água viva*: aproximações  
entre Clarice Lispector e  
Lynda Benglis**

***Sculptural poetics in Água  
viva: approaches between  
Clarice Lispector and Lynda  
Benglis***

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## Resumo

Propôs-se o diálogo de *Água viva* (1973), de Clarice Lispector, com a artista visual Lynda Benglis. Inicialmente, traçaram-se paralelos de Michelangelo (1547) sobre a poesia e a escultura, evidenciando-se o processo criativo de ambas artistas, enfatizando-se suas respectivas rupturas com paradigmas clássicos de harmonia. Na sequência, pautaram-se as conexões de maleabilidade e contenção/sobra em seus trabalhos, assim como suas relações com a matéria, com a imanência do presente e com o poder de provocarem novas perspectivas.

**Palavras-chave:** *Água viva*. Escultura. Processo criativo. Lynda Benglis.

## Abstract

It was proposed a dialogue between *Água viva* (1973), by Clarice Lispector, and visual artist Lynda Benglis. Initially, there were drawn parallels of Michelangelo (1547) about poetry and sculpture, highlighting the creative process of both female artists, emphasizing their ruptures with classic paradigms of harmony. Sequentially, there were settled the connections of malleability and contention/waste in their artworks, as well as their relationship with the matter, with the immanence of the present, and with the power of provoking new perspectives.

**Keywords:** *Água viva*. Sculpture. Creative process. Lynda Benglis

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**Inner *kháos* as a compass**

The relation between plastic arts and literature is not a contemporary discussion. In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, Michelangelo comments about this parallel. In *Lezioni* (1550), the philosopher Benedetto Varchi attaches the conferences of the engraver, pronounced in Florence three years earlier, comparing painting, sculpture, and poetry. The strophes appraised by Varchi are part of a group of Michelangelo's lyric compositions, all related by themes, and they are dedicated to Vittoria Colonna, the Marchioness of Pescara (apud MIGLIACCIO, 1998, pp. 209, 210). Shall we read the following verses:

The greatest artist never knows what excess  
Is buried in a single piece of marble,  
Only a hand obeying the directions of  
Intellect can discover what it contains.

The evil I flee, and the good to which I aspire  
My gracious, noble, and divine lady, lies hidden  
In you in the same way. If I should die, my art  
Will create the opposite of what I desire. [...]  
(MICHELANGELO apud COWAN, 2017, p. 62).

Despite Michelangelo uses the classic quartet, evoking his inspiring “muse”, the content of his discussion is up-to-the-minute, as it contemplates the thesis of construction and representation of an art. The verses: “The greatest artist never knows what excess / Is buried in a single piece of marble” are insightful to explain Clarice Lispector's creative process, for as the sculptor works with the excesses and wastes of his matter, the narrator of *Água viva*<sup>1</sup> (1973) gathers the fragments of *Atrás do pensamento: monólogo com a vida*, and *Objecto gritante*<sup>2</sup> with the aim to establish her prose.

A retrospective: in 1973, Artenova Editors published *Água viva*, reduced from two previous versions: a first one, dated back from July 1971, which had the title *Atrás do pensamento: monólogo com a vida* (Behind Thought: Monologue with Life); and a respective one, *Objecto gritante* (Loud Object), composed by Lispector's chronicles featured in *Jornal do Brasil*, as well as by literary texts and unpublished fragments. Ferreira (1999, p. 255) informs that the idea for the publication came up by the founder of Artenova, journalist and poet Álvaro Pacheco. He would have suggested Clarice to write an “abstract book”. After reviewing it, the writer sensibly reduced her texts: from over two hundred pages, one hundred were left: “This short book had only 280 pages; and I kept cutting, and cutting, and torturing – during three years. I did not know what to do anymore. I was desperate. It had another title. It was all different...”<sup>3</sup> (apud GOTLIB, 1995, p. 410). Effectively, the author struggles when dealing with contention. This is due to the fact her written process, above all in *Água viva*, follows the methodological paths that the engraver applies during his/her creation, in a way the tension between dispersion and containment defines a masterpiece of a time.

For centuries, classic patterns recommended canon to align with the ideal of perfection, so the concept of “symmetria as a divine harmony” (ALBERTI, 1972, p. 27) could be assimilated, since the creation of Adam, clay-shaped by the Creator to the masterly proportions of Venus de Milo, produced during the Hellenistic period (2<sup>nd</sup> Century b. C.). In *Água viva* the journey is exactly the opposite once the narrative voice searches for “the secret harmony of disharmony: I don't want something already made but something still being tortuously made” (LISPECTOR, 2012, p. 6). Here is a writer who praises the process, and not a flawless result, as it is noticed by the sequence of adverbs: “still been tortuously made”.

In *Água viva* the muse, the “*donna leggiadra*” of Clarice Lispector is *Kháos*, so the author writes her text backed by the lack of guidelines or literary rules, inducing readers to self-reasoning. The writer despises

<sup>1</sup> We maintained the title of *Água viva* in Portuguese, following the choice of the English version of the book, published by New Directions (2012), translated by Stefan Tobler, with the introduction, and edition by Benjamin Moser.

<sup>2</sup> We have opted to maintain the original orthography of the title, “Objecto”, respecting Lispector's spelling.

<sup>3</sup> Our translation. Excerpt in Portuguese: “Esse livrinho tinha apenas 280 páginas; eu fui cortando, cortando e torturando – durante três anos. Eu não sabia o que fazer mais. Eu estava desesperada. Tinha outro nome. Era tudo diferente...”.

what glows on the surface, therefore the book, as an art object – reiterating Michelangelo’s poem – unfolds the opposition of desire. The Theogony, by Hesiod, unravels that Kháos comes from the verb *kháino* or its variation *khásko* (open up), meaning a force that heads separation; division. The image evoked by the term is of a beak that opens, splitting into two what was once one. Etymologically speaking, Kháos may be referred as the potency that entails procreation by bipartition, and a translation for it is “rupture” (HESIOD, 1987, p. 72-73).

Yet, the concept of chaos in *Água viva* is built up as “rupture”, and not simply as unjustified anarchy or confusion, as a quick glance could indicate. There is an identified conflict: while Eros means ‘union’, Kháos is the force that represents ‘separation’ (HESIOD, 1987, p. 77). Hence, Kháos was the first principle of Creation (HESIOD, 1987, p. 79, p. 81, p. 97). Heading from these assumptions, textual fragments act as the impelling forces of the narrative, mainly due to the fact Lispector has the absolute consciousness about the “floating” (ROSENTHAL, 1975, p. 122) reality of her writing. The linear perspective of the plot is suppressed, and what prevails are multiple narrative shards. The apparent textual “disorder” is similar to sensations, thoughts, and insights that spark in the potency of creation: “Before I organize myself, I must disorganize myself internally. To experience that first and fleeting primary state of freedom. Of the freedom to err, fall and get up again” (LISPECTOR, 2012, p. 80).

Whenever shattered, harmony provokes both in the author as in the reader an abrupt effect, an immediate rupture, and so fitted by instinctive reactions, this individual searches for a new equilibrium. Thus, in an incessant circle, harmony is only possible when in contact with its reverse. Following this reasoning, Lispector adopts oxymorons – the “harmony of disharmony”, “an athenatic theme”, “hear my silence”, “before I organize myself I must disorganize myself”, “the vibrant silence”, “frigid pleasure”, (LISPECTOR, 2012, p. 6, p. 8, p. 23, p. 61, p. 63, p. 93, respectively) – as strategies to elucidate that the achievement of symmetry depends on ruin, on destruction.

As readers perceive, the book is not up to unleash comfortable feelings – instead of it, *Água viva* incessantly, “tortuously” opens new gaps and thoughts. It is appropriate to state that Lispector does not handle with a literary composition in the standardized definitions, since she creates an “anti-book”<sup>4</sup>: “That is to say that I will write everything that comes into my mind, with the least possible policing”. This statement, found on page 57 of the original manuscript, announces there is room for a spontaneous script, as well it ensures that the thinking process flows within the writing. It is precisely there, in the brief instant of the breakthrough point, anchored with “the least possible policing”, that *Água viva* establishes its milestone. During the reading of *Objecto gritante*’s manuscript, it is observed that the instants are permanently restored, and this is a sign of the dynamism that will surround the further book, filled with contradictions, experiments, and multilayered apprehensions of the world.

Sant’Anna asserts that in Lispector language advances “far from Aristotle *lógos*, but near Heraclitus *lógos*”<sup>5</sup> (1974, p. 88). Readers easily notice that *Água viva* is distant from a frugal draft of composition, but close to the unknown that springs from art experiences. Or, as the narrator’s voice sustains: “You need experience or courage to revalue symmetry, when one can easily imitate the falsely asymmetric, one of the most mundane originalities. My symmetry [...] is not dogmatic” (LISPECTOR, 2012, p. 69). At this point, it is wise to state that North-American visual artist and performer Lynda Benglis is also near the Heraclitus idea of *logos*: first, because she is up to “revalues symmetry”; and also due to the fact her art processes are performed with a range of materials such as wax, metal, paper, plastic, videos, poured latex sculptures, among others:

<sup>4</sup> In the front cover of the original’s manuscript, it is written: “Trata de um anti-livro” (“This is an anti-book”). Note: all the quotes from *Objecto gritante* cited in this article were directly researched at the archives from Clarice Lispector, hosted by National Library (Biblioteca Nacional – Rio de Janeiro), from the period between January-June 2007. The author of this article translated all the selected fragments.

<sup>5</sup> Excerpt in Portuguese: “[sua linguagem] está longe do *lógos* de Aristóteles, mas perto do *lógos* de Heráclito”.



**Figura 1** – Lynda Benglis, latex floor sculpture/painting (Rhode Island, 1969).

(Source: <<http://www.artnet.de/awc/lynda-benglis>>)

The first point that justifies the approximation between Lispector with the renowned sculptor is related to their contemporaneity. Benglis's works became notorious right when the writer published some of her most celebrated fictions: *A maçã no escuro* (*The Apple in the Dark*, 1961), *A Paixão segundo G.H.* (*The Passion According to G.H.*, 1964), and *Uma aprendizagem ou O livro dos prazeres* (*An Apprenticeship or the Book of Delights*, 1969). Later, in the 1970s, the American artist kept stimulating her studies about the matter, space, residues of the shapes, and the free trajectories of expressions, as it may be exemplified in her artworks: "Mumble" (1972), "Noise" (1972), "Collage" (1973), "Discrepancy" (1973), "Enclosure" (1973), "Female Sensibility" (1973), "The Grunions are Running" (1973), "Now" (1973), among others.

It should be observed that 1973 (the publication date of *Água viva*) was a productive year for both artists. At this time, Clarice Lispector was already an acclaimed writer, with a substantial literary experience, therefore she allowed herself to reject classic ploys and formal techniques to fit her writing. Nonetheless, in the beginning of her production, the author also cared about a non-formal language, and it is no surprise that one of her first critics, Álvaro Lins, classified her inaugural book, *Perto do coração selvagem* (*Near to the Wild Heart*, 1943), as an "incomplete", "unfinished" narrative, at the same time she expressed "passions and feelings", "the power of the thought and of intelligence", and mostly, "audacity towards conceptions, images, metaphors, comparisons, and word games"<sup>6</sup> (LINS, 1963, p. 191). About Benglis, her pioneer latex works, and polyurethane installations "tacitly indicate an artist who desired freedom from traditional artistic as well as social boundaries" (RICHMOND, 2013, p. 44). In recent days, Benglis's critics often recognize her attitudes in the past as "occasionally shocking, always thought-provoking" (HUDDLESTON, 2015, p. 1), as she has also been applauded for the "great diversity in her use of materials and sculptural techniques. Even at its most formless, there's a sense of rightness in what she does" (SEARLE, 2015, p. 2).

<sup>6</sup> Our translation. Excerpts in Portuguese: "incompleta e inacabada" / "paixões e os sentimentos" / "o poder do pensamento e da inteligência" / "e sobretudo a audácia na concepção, na imagem, nas metáforas, nas comparações, no jogo das palavras".

Another point to be considered concerning the formal/content approach between Lispector and Benglis is towards the matter they select to render dimensional impressions: soft becomes hard (induration of latex in Benglis sculptures [see fig. 1] / the voracious search of the immediate words in Lispector); hard becomes soft (smoothed surface of the crystallized latex in Benglis [see fig. 1] / the stream of consciousness in Lispector). This is just a brief example of how in both artists the major creation point is movement, and that is the reason shape always finds freedom in their compositions.

The visual artist works with “a sort of alchemical presentation in which material presence, with a life of its own, combines with artistic manipulation as an extension of the body” (CHEIM & READ, 2004). In fact, Benglis’s idea arises right in the core of the conflict. About this thematic, it is clear how for the sculptor the movement of the hands is never a mere touch nor contour, as the slightest action is already the rising of the oeuvre. Conclusions on her constructive process lead to the forewarning she handles with “paradoxes encompassing the tensions between form and fluidity, masculine and feminine, modern technology and ancient mythology, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the local and the global”, as well as she has been proving, for over fifty years, she has the ability to deal with “the chronology of art history and the timeless realm of the eternal now” (BOOKHARDT, 2017, p. 2).

In fact, Benglis moves forward in an infinite now, and that is why some of her critics (MEYER, 2009, 2010; RICHMOND, 2013; SHEETS, 2014; BOOKHARDT, 2017; PATEMAN, 2020) are not attempted to hermetically classify her in particular art schools nor periods. The artist’s potency of expression, and so her capability to apprehend the world’s shapes/contents in “the eternal now” places her in an Avant-guard position; a lady always ahead of her own time. Likewise, in *Água viva* the immanence of “instant-now” is developed as one of the major conductor threads of the narrative: “Let me tell you: I’m trying to seize the fourth dimension of this instant-now”; “But the instant-now is a firefly that sparks and goes out, sparks and goes out. The present is the instant in which the wheel of the speeding car just barely touches the ground”; “And is in the instant-now: you eat the fruit during its ripeness” (LISPECTOR, 2012, p. 3, p. 9, p. 63, respectively). Concerning the engraver’s perceptions of the “instant-now”, Benglis mulls over: “I think we’re always moved by our times. We represent our times. Certainly, what I did when I did it was new, but it’s not new anymore. In my work back then and now, I’m dealing with realities, with real feelings and questions. It’s open-ended” (apud BUETI, 2016).

For both artists, “instant-now” happens to be a trap framed to catch the fragments of the present, so “we project time into space, and we express duration in terms of extensity, and succession thus takes the form of a continuous line or a chain, the parts of which touch without penetrating one another” (BERGSON, 2020, p. 27). In *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* Bergson understands that “mental image thus shaped implies the perception, no longer successive, but simultaneous, of a before and after” (2020, p. 27). Taking these remarks into account, it is necessary such a state of concentration to grab the “instant-now”. The “acute state of happiness” (LISPECTOR, 2012, p. 47) is only felt during lucid, dense, concentrated moments, or, as Bergson recognizes, “we cannot form an image [...] without the accompanying intuition of space” (2020, p. 77). Therefore, the artists’ movements are never performed randomly, for the state of consciousness leads to the “continuous presence of climaxes, condensed in a block of images that do become images-questions”<sup>7</sup> (RONCADOR, 2002, p. 75).

Amongst the multiple “images-questions” that fulfil *Água viva*, here is a poetical one which appropriately pictures the “instant-now”:

In this instant-now I’m enveloped by a wandering diffuse desire for marveling and millions of reflections of the sun in the water that runs from the faucet onto the lawn of a garden all ripe with perfumes, garden and shadows that I invent right here and now and that are the concrete means of speaking in this my instant of life. My state is that of a garden with running water. In describing it I try to mix words that time can make itself. What I tell you should be read quickly like when you look (LISPECTOR, 2012, p. 11).

In iconographic terms, Lispector’s excerpt can be represented by Benglis’s *Pink Ladies* (2014):

<sup>7</sup> Our translation. Excerpt in Portuguese: “presença contínua de clímaxes, condensados em blocos de imagens que se tornam imagens-questões”.





**Fig. 2** – *Pink Ladies* (bronze and cast pigmented polyurethane)  
(Source: <<https://stormking.org/exhibitions/benglis/about.html>>)

The matching of *Água viva*'s passage with *Pink Ladies* is an optimal example of how Lispector and Benglis dialogue. *Pink Ladies* is a set of sculptures that gather her *Water Sources* series, centered around outdoor water fountains. "More broadly, this presentation takes as its point of departure the interest in water and landscape that Benglis has explored throughout the last thirty years of her career": here is how Storm King Art Center (SKAC), a 500-acre open sky museum located in Hudson Valley, presents her exhibition, which was held to the public from May 16 to November 8, 2015. The museum's page introduces her set of works focused on water, informing that the artist "grew up surrounded by lakes, rivers, and marshes in Lake Charles, Louisiana [...]. Many of her fountains, such as *Pink Ladies*, make reference to the human form, and Benglis sees a natural connection between people and water" (SKAC, 2015).

Undoubtedly, the artist's process when creating her masterpiece was very unique: the bright pink color of her lower pigmented polyurethane and bronze flowers came "from a kite [she] saw aloft in Ahmedabad, India; in the fall of 1979, she took part in a residency there with Sarabhai family and stayed six weeks" (GOODMAN, 2015). Bookhardt (2017) adds up the fact that her masterpiece was "inspired by the carnivalesque Gujarati kite festival". The pink vertical flowers assume a tree form since each one of them is composed of several cones from which the water drops – from one vessel to the next, as a continuous ballet of beauty, female bliss, and peace. Its state is primary, brute, the state of all things in the times of Creation. A state of "a garden with running water", as described by Lispector.

Fabricius, in *Théologie de l'Eau* (1741), says: "There is no Polyp nor chameleon that can change its color as much as the water" (apud BACHELARD, 1971, p. 13). As mutable as the water, it is clear – both in Benglis and in Lispector – the desire to merge with their poetical creations: "we are walking water vessels ourselves", says Benglis (apud SKAC, 2015). About Lispector, she is embraced, "enveloped" by a "wandering diffuse desire for marveling", so she freezes the "instant-now" and slowly pictures "millions of reflections of the sun in the water that runs from the faucet". As a matter of fact, this is a very classic image, in a way her text allows itself to move from joyful images to chaotic frames at a snap of a finger. Nevertheless, she is eager to keep it alive the refreshing feeling of instant-now, placing herself in a "garden all ripe with perfumes, garden

and shadows”. Or, as Bachelard pictures, “I dedicate my imagination to water [...]. I cannot sit beside a stream without falling into a profound reverie, without picturing my youthful happiness” (1983, p. 8).

Vigorous as the water, both artists are seeking to experience their own echoes and innermost feelings. During the process of creation, it is like as if they were entering the Joycean “riverun” spirit in *Finnegan’s Wake* (1939): “[...] riverun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay brings us by a commodious vicious of recirculation [...]” (JOYCE, 1967, p. 13). Broadly, writer and sculptor are so intimate to the fountain of pleasure that they can only ease their feverishly sensations when producing their artworks. Bachelard, in *Water and Dreams* (1983), analyses that “water is not only a group of images revealed in wondering contemplation”, but “an element of materializing imagination” (p. 11). In his long, deep essay on the imagination of matter, the philosopher ponders that “imagination invents more than objects and dramas – it invents a new life, a new spirit; it opens eyes which hold new types of visions” (p. 16). In effect, Benglis and Lispector deal with art visions that do shiver each new, each translucent artistic gesture. Their creation displacements show a deep wish to reveal the world and the pulsating sensations alive in the “instant-now”; as alive as the water, that all purifies and all baptizes: “And you feel that it’s a gift because you experience, right at the source, the suddenly indubitable present of existing miraculously and materially” (LISPECTOR, 2012, p. 80). By way of clarification, when deciding the title of her book, the Brazilian author chose *Água viva* instead of *Objecto gritante (Loud Object)* because of its meaning: “something that bubbles, in the fountain”<sup>8</sup> (apud GOTLIB, 1995, p. 410). There are no doubts Clarice’s feelings are primary, raw, as all things before the Creation, or, as in the words of Hélène Cixous, “the text is metaphor itself, a metaphor that is not a metaphor but *Água viva*” (1990, p. 17).

“Blessing” is also a true feeling when the art spectator is before *Pink Ladies*, with its “urethane fountain” look, “a constellation of three stacked totems of topsy-turvy cones with gleeful flourishes realized in a morphology that is at once loosely visceral”, plus “the shocking pink (Schiaparelliesque) hue and the organic articulation of the surface might invoke instead some whimsical topiaries of bougainvillea” (CHAVE, 2013, p. 10). In addition, Bookhardt (2017) blandishes *Pink Ladies* “notion of fluidity, with its implicit sense of ebb and flow, a dynamic that applies as much to cultural epochs as to the natural world”.

Indeed, *Pink Ladies* has another important theme that is inherent to Lispector: the pink conic vessels have the form of a uterus. Widely, Lynda Benglis is renowned as a “feminist” artist by North-American critics. Jones (1994, p. 17) qualifies her as a “contemporary feminist and queer body artist”. Nimptsch (2017) understands Benglis “adapted the style of this movement as well as traditional sculpture to make feminist statements about the human form and the art world”, as well as “she essentially carved her own path in as a woman in a man’s world and her unapologetically feminist work is said to have inspired many other iconic women in the art world [...]”. Bookhart (2017) sees that for the engraver “feminism appears to be a deeply rooted, instinctual impetus that encompasses all aspects of her life, including her approach to making and understanding art”.

In *Água viva*, ‘feminine’ is – among other symbols – linked with the fertility of running water and also with the ‘womb’ icon, either displayed in a direct way, either metaphorized by the ancient image of a grotto: “It is a world tangled up in creepers, syllables, woodbine, colors and words-threshold of an ancestral cavern that is the womb of the world and from it I shall be born”; “[...] and I, blood of nature-extravagant and dangerous caves, talisman of the Earth, where stalactites, fossils and rocks come together”; “I, creature of echoing caverns that I am”; “I was born like this: drawing from my mother’s uterus the life that was always eternal” (LISPECTOR, 2012, p. 8, p. 9, p. 27, respectively).

In a patriarchal, antique world, the etymology for the Greek word *hystera* was associated with ‘womb’, ‘uterus’, and from this concept came up the “gynecological” settlings for “abnormal behaviors” linked to a wide set “psychiatric and neurological disorders”. As a matter of fact, both Egyptian and Greek societies spread out, for centuries, the idea of “a womb wandering throughout the body, as the cause of hysteria” (MATA, 2017). Nowadays, this concept fortunately has changed: Rupprecht (2013, p. 18) shows how artists have turned to the womb to think through the fractures of late modernity, reflecting on the relationship between the past and the future, and also on the creative process. About the uterus power in arts, Cuban-American

<sup>8</sup> Our translation. Excerpt in Portuguese: “Era *Objecto gritante*, mas eu prefiro *Água viva*, coisa que borbulha. Na fonte”.

artist, Ana Mendieta, reflects upon: “I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body [...]. I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe”. She follows on: “It is a return to the maternal source. [...] I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body [...]. [It is] an omnipresent female force, the after-image of being encompassed within the womb, in a manifestation of my thirsty for being” (1981 apud PERREAULT, 1987, p. 10-27).

In the realms of reality, the blessing of living, the fertility of doubts, and so the dynamic crossings of paradoxes are constantly spread out in both artists. Lispector shows her fertile, her “riverun” state in the original of *Água viva*: “I want to write by running my fingers in the typewriter, annotating whatever comes – even though the text seems fragmentary”. This excerpt, a footnote located on the fourth page of the manuscript, is another information about Lispector’s narrative process, in a way she deals with “the profound organic disorder that nevertheless hints at an underlying order. The great potency of potentiality. [...]. I want the experience of a lack of construction” (LISPECTOR, 2012, p. 20).

Surely, the “organic disorder” is one of the most observed characteristics of Lispector’s fiction, therefore it is fundamental to avoid the hermetic formalization of *Água viva* as a “novel”. One year before its publication, the author herself denied pointing a literary genre for the book: “It is not a short story, neither a novel, neither a biography, nor a travelling book...”<sup>9</sup> (LISPECTOR apud GUERRA, 1972, p. 4). As a matter of fact, during the reading of *Água viva* it is clear the repulse against arbitrary definitions: “I have no lifestyle: I reached the impersonal [...]” (LISPECTOR, 2012, p. 40); “It is useless to classify myself: I simply sneak off, I do not allow it, label no longer grabs me. I am living a new, true state of mind, curious about itself, and it so attractive and personal that I am not able neither to paint nor to write it”<sup>10</sup> (LISPECTOR, 1973, p. 12).

“Label no longer grabs me”: here is a meaningful concept that *Água viva*’s readers must bear in mind. The author enjoys the experience to enter “a new, true state of mind”, that is, at the same time, “attractive and personal” in such a way she is not even able to accurately portray it. As Lispector understands such condition, she waits for the unpredicted movements of the voyage: “I may not have meaning but it is the same lack of meaning that the pulsing vein has”<sup>11</sup> (LISPECTOR, 2012, p. 8). Therefore, it is not by chance that one of the epigraphs disposed in the original (p. 5) is from Henri Miller: “The best technic is none at all”.

Likewise, Benglis is a genuine type of artist, and labeling her is a rough, if not a wrong procedure since she has “many signature styles, including painted ceramics, figurative aluminum sculptures, and bronze fountains” (NIMPTSCH, 2017). Searle (2015, p. 1) sees that “she can be mucky, she can shimmer in gold”. Goodman (2015) places her as “one of the most necessary sculptors of her generation. Her mixture of ebullience and humor is more or less without precedent; she has constructed an esthetic life from work that eschews high formalism”. Richmond, when picturing the 1970s in the U.S., points out that the critics seemed somehow multifarious when classifying a set of artists, therefore “as a form of mythic speech, however, such tropes were neither absolute nor stable”, so “both male and female artists took advantage of this instability to create a space for alternative subjectivities and relationships to flourish” (2013, p. 57). Goodman (2015) broadens this thought, stating that Benglis “embodies the rebellion of a generation that worked out a kind of counter-culture, in which desire and a general antagonism toward the hierarchy of form merged in a boisterous denial of so-called ‘serious’ art”. The art critic concludes his argument by expressing that “this does not mean that Benglis has rejected culture – far from it. Instead, her lyric vision celebrates impulse and an originality of shapes that are closer to content than to formal artifice” (GOODMAN, 2015).

Dialoguing with Benglis, Clarice’s literature raises from the poetic instants of meditation. Let us recall that in *Água viva* the protagonist is a female painter. Not so ever, this the only information about her: female painter. The reader does not get to know her time of living, nor her location, nor her routine, neither her affective relationships. Nothing is disclosed. Curiously, in a dialogue with Brazilian writer Nélide Piñon, Lispector admits that she initially considered having a writer instead of a plastic artist as the protagonist of *A*

<sup>9</sup> Our translation. Excerpt in Portuguese: “Ele não é conto, nem romance, nem biografia, nem tampouco livro de viagens”.

<sup>10</sup> Our translation. Excerpt in Portuguese: “Inútil querer me classificar: eu simplesmente escapulo não deixando, gênero não me pega mais. Estou num estado muito novo e verdadeiro, curioso de si mesmo, tão atraente e pessoal a ponto de não poder pintá-lo ou escrevê-lo”.

<sup>11</sup> “The vein that pulses” was the first title given by Lispector to her book *A maçã no escuro* (1961).



*Paixão Segundo G. H.* (1964). However, she did not pick the first option because she was reluctant readers could make personal connections between the character and the author (apud GOTLIB, 1995, p. 376). It is interesting to notice that she often chooses a painter and a plastic artist as protagonist voices in her fiction.

Hereby, an appendix must be traced: Lispector's experience with painting. From March 1975 up to May 1976 the writer produced sixteen paintings – fifteen of them are hosted today in the archive of Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa (VIANNA, 1998, p. 52). However, the painting experience was nothing but a hobby, an entertainment for her, as she jokes about it: "I paint so bad that it is such a pleasure to see it [...]"<sup>12</sup> (apud BORELLI, 1981, p. 70). This mocking matters to demonstrate that Lispector transited across other art fields, therefore her writing somehow tears it apart the division line that separates the ways of expression, no matter if it is painting, writing, sculpting, music, dance. Due to the fact her narrative is always surrounded by inner anarchy, words, thoughts, and images arise innumerable properties. Or, according to Kandinsky in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*: "The different art expressions display themselves each in its own way and peculiar manner. Despite, if not due to this singularity, never in times before, have different art expressions been so close to each other [...]" (1977, p. 23). As a late Modernist, Lispector adopts Kandinsky's idea: "I think the creative process of a painter and of a writer comes from the same source"<sup>13</sup> (apud BORELLI, 1981, p. 70). Before giving life to the literary material, the writer – as any other art creator – recognizes the meditative power about the nature of the process. Permanently, during her work, Lispector leads her text to the edge between matter and its conceptual light, just as the painter and the engraver do when challenging contrasts. The plastic artist needs to insist and struggle against the matter to achieve the aimed color, shape, and shades. In turn, literary authors seek for a contemplative alchemic approach, guided by their innermost sensations, and also by their unrestrained wish to write, as if image exerted over them a kind of trance: "I am in a trance. I penetrate the surrounding air. What a fever: I can't stop living. [...]. I'm watching myself think. [...] Guts tortured by voluptuousness guide me, fury of impulses" (LISPECTOR, 2012, p. 60-61).

Lispector works in a "feverish" mood – as a result, she is not able to "stop living" her writing. She cannot detain thinking; therefore, her narrative is like a water stream. As a matter of fact, *Água viva* was translated into English as *Stream of Life* by Elizabeth Lowe and Earl Fitz for the University of Minnesota Press edition in 1989. So, as an author who flings herself in the chaos of her creation, Clarice's words are compared to an ontological torrent; similar to the overflow of an uncontrolled speaking voice. Or, as Bernardo Soares, the literary entity of Fernando Pessoa in *The Book of Disquietude*, minds: "If I write what I feel, it's to reduce the fever of feeling [...]. I make landscapes out of what I feel" (PESSOA, 1996, p. 54).

In turn, also moved by the "fever of feeling", Benglis has often emphasized that her work "is an expression of space. What is the experience of moving? Is it pictorial? Is it an object? Is it a feeling? It all comes from my body. I am the clay; I have been extruded, in a sense. How to tie it together? I don't need to tie a knot" (apud ZWICK, 2014). The artist does not need to tie knots, also accepting *kháos* as a compass. About *Água viva* (and its preceding manuscripts), the authorial voice walks in the direction of the flow, so the action of the narrative seems hard to control. The narrator's voice questions: "Don't I have a plot of life?" (LISPECTOR, 1973, p. 87). More than a prose discourse, Lispector opts to describe her anti-method or her existential improvisations of life. More than an aesthetic discourse, Benglis opts to materialize her anti-method, or her experiences of translating images into shapes, colors, and objects.

### Provoking the matter

Creation demands challenging. All things that bring life claims from the artist a desire to go beyond the matter. The demand of the sculptor is, elementarily, a meditation over the shapes, and also a deep knowledge of the metamorphoses. Within this framework of logic, there is another strophe from Michelangelo that fits this subtopic as an associative parameter for the deliberative metaphysics of *Água viva*. In the form of a *mottetto*, here it is the composition:

<sup>12</sup> Our translation. Excerpt in Portuguese: "Pinto tão mal que dá gosto".

<sup>13</sup> Our translation. Excerpt in Portuguese: "Acho que o processo criador de um pintor e do escritor são da mesma fonte".

Just as, lady, by chipping away, I bring forth  
 A living figure from hard alpine marble  
 That grows larger when stone is reduced,  
 So do the excesses in my own flesh, with its  
 Course, rough, and hard skin, hide some good  
 In my soul, trembling under this burden.  
 Only you can release from my innermost being  
 Such a translucent and commanding figure,  
 For I have neither the will nor the strength.  
 (MICHELANGELO apud COWAN, 2017, p. 62, 63).

Despite Michelangelo composes a classic versification, again he brings the poet/engraver's deadlock in the face of the inaugural act of his/her verse/sculpture: "The artwork attracts the one who consecrates himself to it to the point at which it encounters its own impossibility" (BLANCHOT, 1989, p. 83). Both of Michelangelo's poetic fragments selected in this article have in common the creative process, as well as the contrast between the imperfection of the lover (a metaphor for the 'artist'), and the perfection of the desired object. Recapping the sonnet, the hand of the sculptor – no matter how hard he/she tries to maximize the image in the block – is never able to achieve the desired perfection. Or, as it is read in *Água viva*: "I am defeated by myself" (LISPECTOR, 1973, p. 84). In Michelangelo's *motto*, the lyric-Self is never filled with "the will nor the strength", although this voice observes all the "excesses" in such a way the "flesh" hides the ideal.

For the sculptor, as for the writer, the excesses, as well as the absences, are keys to construct a masterpiece, so Michelangelo shows his craftiness to see the "living figure [...] growing larger when stone is reduced". At the same time, the wastes also "hide some good". For the Master, it must be understood the great emptiness of the marble. As already pointed out, Lispector struggles against the excesses and the containment of her writing, so she follows "the tortuous way of roots popping up from earth" since she has "the gift of the passion" (LISPECTOR, 1973, p. 23). "Passion" here should be taken as a metaphor of *pathos*, which excites the immensity of ontological questions that fulfill the empty text; however, just about to be engendered, just like in the Creation. The engraver exhibit passion when his/her soul finds the contrasts between the matter and the absence of shape. So, it is correct to say that in his poetic fragment, Michelangelo deals with the ancient metaphor of desire as the void of love which occupies the soul of the lover. The ideal of perfection that surrounds the desired object and the "failure" to conquest it by the beloved suffering minstrel is an analogy that fits the courtship of the writer/sculptor with his/her idealized matter. Therefore, in this relationship, Michelangelo seems to demonstrate that the breath, the insistence towards the matter is way more important than the technique. Hence, the creative force lives in the intellect, and the hand is only the articulator of its orders.

In this sense, for both writer and engraver the poetic matter never gets rid of its oppressive condition when restricted to phoneme and clay, respectively, in a way the very first image that rises on the creator's head is already a trajectory of the art piece. Bachelard parses that "the engraver sets a world in motion, [...] provoking the forces that lie dormant in a flat universe. Provocation is his way of creating" (1971, p. 56).

In fact, 'provocation' is a noun that well defines Benglis and Lispector works. Benglis recalls that in one of her first collective expositions, in Whitney Museum, in 1969 (see figure 1), the curators "complained" about the "explosion of colors" of her work, in a way it "wasn't suitable" when compared to the monochromatic work of other artists, such as Richard Serra and Ryman (PAVIA, 2015, p. 2). In *Água viva*, confrontation is also explicit: "I lose the identity of the world inside myself and exist without guarantees", "[...] we always look at ourselves in an inconvenient light" (LISPECTOR, 2012, p. 64, 74, respectively).

Let us assume that the predisposition to confront, in the name of creative freedom, is the first step into the elaboration of an artwork. No doubt that this confrontation may be described as "provocation". In 1974, one year after *Água viva*'s publication, Benglis would shock America with her self-portrait (photographed by Annie Leibowitz as an invitation for an exposition), displayed on a whole page of *Artforum* magazine: the artist was naked, and she was obscenely holding a fake phallus. Alvarez (2014, p. 2) points out the scandal was not only because of her nude but because she did hold "a dick in a ridiculous way". In November's edition (number 1974), the next one after the image's publication, five editors (two women amongst them) published a letter dismembering themselves to the previous publication, for the picture was "extremely vulgar" and its effect

was “brutalizing”. School principals and art critics canceled the subscription of the magazine. Still, according to Alvarez (2014, p. 2), the magazine received, in a single edition, a greater volume of letters than the ones sent during its thirteen years of history. One year after, in an interview for the fourth edition of feminist magazine *Ms.*, Benglis would have affirmed that her portrait should be defined as the “ultimate mockery of the pinup e and the macho” (apud LIPPARD, 1975, p. 106). Richard Meyer quotes the artist: “I was really studying pornography and I really wanted something that alluded to it and mocked both sexes... I wanted to be ambiguous enough that it couldn’t be said what I was” (apud MEYER, 2010, p. 65).

In this scenery, Benglis shows herself, predominantly in the 1960s and 1970s, as a provocative artist against patriarchal traditions. Her reaction is against sexual “puritanism”, as well as against the “purists” – in terms of technique and freedom of expression; and against linear concepts of art. And even though Lispector has never posed with a fake phallus, nor she has written texts discussing the topic, she “assumes a protest icon against a patriarchal society, as she usually uncovers the female routine with its livingness and oppressions”<sup>14</sup> (PRAZERES, 2015, p. 27). In *Perto do coração selvagem* (1943), the author mentions gender relations, pointing its differences and inequalities. Later on, in *A Paixão segundo G. H.* (1964), and in *Água viva* (1973), the narrator voices are female, and they are the only protagonists of their stories – there is not a single male voice in there. In 1977, in *A hora da estrela* (*The Hour of the Star*), the female character Macabéa represents not only the discriminated figure of the émigré from the Northeastern part of Brazil as well as the subaltern woman due to her social, cultural, and economic conditions. She is also segregated because of her appearance and naivety.

Other than the obvious gender questions found both in Lispector and Benglis, with its peculiarities and differences, the confrontation, the provocation hereby exposed adopts the contours concerning the struggle against aesthetic formalization. Therefore, not explicitly pornographic, the Brazilian author dialogues with the North-American artist due to the fact both refuse to follow the standards, in a way their discourses are nothing but a reinterpretation of the being, and its respective readings of the world. In both of them what prevails – other than problem focusing, anguishes, anxieties, and censorship fighting – are the feelings, reveries, divagations, desires, and thoughts of artists who are deeply engaged with their beliefs and artworks. Bachelard is one of the authors who claim that the artist infinitely struggles against the boundaries which obscure and condemn the creative fury: “the engraver’s landscape is a disposition or outburst of will, an activity that is impatient to come to grips with the world” (1971, p. 56).

“Provocation” actually seems to be the fuel that moves Benglis and Lispector’s works: for the sculptor, whenever she is eager to create shapes, she feels “a need to kind of wrestle with the material and be integrated with the form and the surface. I can only tell you that the thinking in it is so fast. It’s a dance. I feel the clay; I am the clay [...]” (apud ADAMS, 2016). As pointed before, since Benglis’s first latex compositions and polyurethane installations, it is clear to notice in her work “grid formations to make the object itself, rather than the content” (KARNES, 2002, p. 216).

In *Água viva* words unscramble with the same uniqueness the engraver deals with her material, therefore it is plausible to state that all means lead to the representation of the full-fledged instant. The lyric-Self is constantly “provoking the forces that lie dormant in a flat universe” (BACHELARD, 1971, p. 56), and as a sculptor who polishes her hard rock, Lispector glimpses the *brainstorming* that precedes her writing: “Madness borders the cruelest good sense. This is a brain tempest and one sentence barely has anything to do with the next. I swallow the madness that is no madness – it is something else” (2012, p. 76). Lispector focuses on her immediate outflow process, therefore “something else” justifies it all. Benglis plays the same paradoxical game, as she refuses steady shapes in order to reach for multiple responses of the matter: “I feel this in all my work, that I am the material and what I am doing is embracing it and allowing it to take form” (apud ZWICK, 2014).

In fact, there are no utilitarian senses or standardized paths to follow in Benglis nor in Lispector’s productions. About the writer, critics affirm: “[To Clarice] the mythical, the fabulous, the fantastic become all

<sup>14</sup> Our translation. Excerpt in Portuguese: “[...] assume a marca do protesto contra a sociedade patriarcal, pois desnuda, usualmente, o cotidiano feminino, com as vivências e opressões [...]”.

real, much more than the tangible things”<sup>15</sup> (MOISÉS, 1964, p. 122); “[Claricean art] is attached to certain magical processes of world’s apprehension”<sup>16</sup> (NUNES, 1969, p. 186); “To get in touch with Clarice’s text, to be touched by it demands readers prepared for the journey towards disorganization, disorientation, dissolution [...]”<sup>17</sup> (AMARAL, 2005, p. 25); “[Clarice] transformed her individual experience into universal poetry” (MOSER, 2012, p. 9). About the visual artist, critics state: “Benglis approaches secrecy not as mode of absolute concealment but rather as a form of private knowledge that may be rendered in visual terms so as to be shared with others”, and also “a reminder that the texture and syntax of everyday life may also be the markings of art” (2010, p. 181); “That kind of playfulness, humor, irony and intelligent questioning is present in much of her work, challenging the viewer to confront their own perceptions and preconceptions” (HUDDLESTON, 2015); “Merging a myriad of opposing influences, inspiring locales, artistic styles, and grand notions [...], Lynda Benglis’s [...] reminds us of the transitory nature of human life and our civilizations” (NIMPTSCH, 2017).

Both artists are fighters in the sense of battling against an “easy” type of art. Their movements follow the construction/deconstruction ballet of creation: lingeringly the text, the brute matter takes form until it becomes a “hard, imperishable object” (LISPECTOR, 2012, p. 37). In an interview with André Parinaud, Alberto Giacometti discusses the struggle of the engraver in order to retain the mold of the idea captured in the instant of creation: “Every time I see shape [...] it really seems doubtful, or partial. We see how it disappears, how it reappears – shape lies on existing and not existing. [...] All modern artists’ procedures have this wish to capture what constantly fades away” (2006, p. 72).

In the venture of apprehending constantly changing forms and forces, text/body language in *Água viva* and in Benglis’s oeuvres crosses the borders of their own discourses, sharpening the creative mood of artists who work distantly from the programmatic: “The unforeseen, improvised and fatal, fascinates me” (LISPECTOR, 2012, p. 47). Lispector confesses that “a beautiful landscape causes [her] nothing but fatigue” (2012, p. 32). She rather enjoys the “convulsion of language” (SANT’ANNA, 1974, p. 30).

All Claricean inventories and styles are, in *Água viva*, mutable, therefore the wild wind of creation sculpts, freely, the hard stone of language. In effect, the hard, and at the same time, the inexpressible stone of words is Lispector’s inner force. A force that rises and has the nature to open new thoughts, and that, thunderously, reaches the empty spaces discussed by Michelangelo in his poems: “a figurative interval to open a clearing in my nourishing jungle” (LISPECTOR, 2012, p. 26). Emptiness, a void that deflagrates the poetic force of a writer/engraver who “plunges” the word/matter in “deserted emptiness”: “I plunge the word into the deserted emptiness: it’s a word like a slim monolithic block that gives off shadow” (LISPECTOR, 2012, p. 41). So is Benglis, consciously lost “to create a body of work that does justice to a sensual – an overtly sexual – vision of the world, one in which the desire to merge, erotically and emotionally, finds a real place in today’s theater of visual art” (GOODMAN, 2015).

How the word or visual figure will be “plunged” into the reader/spectator’s mind and soul, it depends on each individual’s life experiences. What really matters here is that, when finding the empty spaces, both Lispector and Benglis allow their art observers to discover what was hidden behind the interline, hidden in the form, so they vividly trace their poetic messages. In *Água viva* and in Benglis’s productions the open crack of the matter animates the shapes; and such a gap welcomes an art that, inexorably, reconstructs itself from its own ruins.

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<sup>15</sup> Our translation. Excerpt in Portuguese: “[A Clarice] o mítico, o fabuloso, o fantástico tornam-se reais, muito mais do que as coisas palpáveis”.

<sup>16</sup> Our translation. Excerpt in Portuguese: “[A arte clariceana] está vinculada a certos processos mágicos de apreensão do mundo”.

<sup>17</sup> Our translation. Excerpt in Portuguese: “Entrar em contato com o texto de Clarice, ser tocado por ele exige leitores preparados para a travessia em direção à desorganização, à desorientação, à dissolução [...]”.

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