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Untitled (Work): Q+A With Clara Ianni

brian boucher 09/26/11

The youngest artist in the Istanbul Biennial is 24-year-old Clara Ianni, from São Paulo. In the "Untitled (Abstraction)" group exhibition is her *Abstract Work* (2010), which consists of a shovel hanging on the wall with a square hole cut out of the metal blade. Previous works have also dealt with labor—for example, her 2009 video *Here you can dream*, in which the artist builds a wall out of cement bricks, ultimately filling the frame. She has also addressed frustration, in works such as *Steal this Piece*, 2011, where the title phrase is carved into blocks of marble; and geometry—*Territorial Pissings* is a 2011 piece in which the artist marked out a square on the gallery floor in her own urine.

Over Turkish tea at a hookah café outside the Biennial, *A.i.A.* spoke with Ianni about the concepts that inform *Abstract Work*.



INSTALLATION VIEW. PHOTO BY NATHALIE BARKI

BRIAN

BOUCHER One can easily see the reference in your *Abstract Work* to Duchamp's 1915 readymade, *In Advance of the Broken Arm*. And one can see that it's a shovel that won't work, that will endlessly fail. Abstract work of art and, as you mentioned to me already, the words for work and labor

are the same in Portuguese.

CLARA IANNI My very minimal intervention with the object operates on two levels. The first is canceling out the function of the object, invalidating this object that is meant to work the land. I come from an immigrant Italian family that went to Brazil to work in the fields. Then, with the perfectly square hole, there's an art historical reference to the geometric vocabulary of formal abstraction.

BOUCHER Am I right to think there's a relationship to Marx's idea of alienated labor, as well?

IANNI I don't even think about alienated work. What I'm more concerned with is just the paradox of working in contemporary society, doing work that doesn't lead you anywhere, and you cannot achieve and you cannot access the things that you are doing. You can read the subject of my piece as alienated work, but I think it's just the way work is done in our society.

BOUCHER So is there a connection with Marx?

IANNI Yes. But for Marx, there are two different concepts: abstract labor and concrete labor. There are a lot of levels of my work that fit well with the concept of this biennial, which reviews the vocabulary of minimalism and abstraction, which are very important in Brazilian art history. By way of a pun on Marx's concept, my work connects to the Concrete movement, and the Neo-Concrete movement, as well as Helio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, much of whose work was interpreted as being non-narrative and not political. There are many different ways I could go in talking about this work. I don't even know where to start.

BOUCHER Speaking of the start, tell us a little about your background. Where did you study?

IANNI I studied at the University of São Paulo. I got a bachelor's degree in painting, though much of my work now is in sculpture and installation. I took a lot of classes in philosophy and psychology, which influenced the way I try to think about my work.

BOUCHER Is that where you encountered Marx?

IANNI No, actually my family has a quite Marxist-oriented background. My grandfather Octavio Ianni was a sociologist in Brazil and was involved in translating Marx into Portuguese in the '60s. He wrote a lot about politics in Brazil, and issues of race and so on. When the dictatorship came, my parents were involved in the student movement, and during the dictatorship they were involved in the resistance. They were very involved with theater. Using a lot of references to Brecht, they used popular and working-class theater to do interventions in society. My grandfather lost his university job when some critical intellectuals were fired. Me, I used to be involved with anarchist groups in Brazil.

BOUCHER So you didn't learn it. You lived it.

IANNI Right. I didn't learn it in class. But that's the great thing about being an artist—you can work in all these different influences. And political influence is very strong in my background, so it is bound to appear in the work.

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