

Gothic Presences in *Eating your heart out*, a Collaborative Sculpture of Rui Chafes and Vera Mantero



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Abstract

Eating your heart out, an installation that represented Portugal at the 26th São Paulo Biennial, has a metaphoric title that expresses the savagery of a negative desire which surpasses all the civilized limits to express the difficult presence of a body through some relational forms created by sculptor Rui Chafes and dancer/choreographer Vera Mantero. The relations between an iron sculpture and a living body produce a tension between the absolute closure of Chafes's sculpture and the infinite movement of Mantero's choreographies. The duplicity of this relation, which combines repression and freedom, limitation and transcendence, conformity and subversion, savagery and poetry, violence and beauty, originates an endless dialectic confrontation that leads to many contradictory possibilities, which increase the difficulties to solve the enigma of the encounter of these two Portuguese artists. Its mystery and strangeness can be understood through the presence of certain paradoxes of gothic sublimity present in works so determined by the condition of unrepresentability. This condition developed in Chafes and Mantero a fascination with the negative pleasures of an art that creates secrets instead of their resolution and that produces exhaustion and disquiet instead of order and stability. Consequently, their works can be very close to a gothic aesthetics usually interested in primitive emotions and mysteries that have the power to disturb and resist reason like a dancer's naked body full of arborescent motifs on her skin, in a suspended iron chair 5 metres above the ground.

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convergences and complementary facets between their creative universes, but it also reveals meaningful divergences objectified in the relations between an iron sculpture and a living body, which produce a tension between the absolute closure of Chafes's sculpture and the infinite movement of Mantero's choreographies. The duplicity of this relation, which combines repression and freedom, limitation and transcendence, conformity and subversion, savagery and poetry, violence and beauty, originates an endless dialectic confrontation that leads to many contradictory possibilities, which increase the difficulties to solve the enigma of the encounter of these two Portuguese artists. Its mystery and strangeness can be understood through the presence of certain paradoxes of gothic sublimity present in their works so determined by the condition of unrepresentability. This condition developed in Chafes and Mantero a fascination with the negative pleasures of an art that creates secrets instead of their resolution and that produces exhaustion and disquiet instead of order and stability. Consequently, their works can be very close to a gothic aesthetics usually interested in primitive emotions and mysteries that have the power to disturb and resist reason like a dancer's naked body full of arborescent motifs on her skin, in a suspended iron chair 5 metres above the ground.

In a recent work entitled *New Gothic Art*, Francesca Gavin considers that it is incorrect to describe some artists as purely gothic, but she concludes that "there is a thread of dark imagery or ideas that runs through much contemporary art" (Gavin 7). It is the presence of this thread that one can perceive in the works of Vera Mantero and Rui Chafes, especially in *Eating Your Heart Out*, as in many different art forms that are directly associated with the Gothic, and which create an aesthetic universe where we can find monsters, the grotesque, violated or mutant bodies, the divided self, ghosts, dolls, masks, skulls, disgust and the abject. In contemporary art, "Gothic" can be considered a partial term which is used to identify a peculiar, dark sensitivity, being a

borrowed term that Gilda Williams considered to be “applied liberally to artworks centering on death, deviance, the erotic macabre, psychologically charged sites, disembodied voices and fragmented bodies” (Williams 12). As in Literature, gothic contemporary art is principally Anglo-Saxon with some good examples from continental Europe, and this fact is also relevant to the works of Vera Mantero, who studied in London under Rudolf von Laben and in New York in Marce Cunningham’s studio. This is somehow similar to what happened with Rui Chafes, who was very much influenced by German literature, an influence that has allowed his works to establish surprising connections between art and literature. Chafes was even very explicit about his artistic tastes, when he directly expressed his admiration for gothic art confessing that: “Without any doubt I think the art that moves me most is the late Gothic. That is my passion. I studied it together with modern art” (Chafes 257). As it happens with the majority of contemporary artists, Vera Mantero and Rui Chafes never defined themselves as “gothic” and their works were never directly associated with gothic sources, as it occurred with the works of Douglas Gordon, Stan Douglas, Banks Violette or with the disturbing pieces of the most gothic of artists, Damien Hirst. However, as it happened in Martha Graham’s choreographies and in Louise Bourgeois’s sculptures, these two Portuguese artists set the scene of their art, like gothic novels do, in an unfamiliar and frightening place, approaching the gothic themes of death, transgression, monstrosity, torture, anguish, confinement, etc.

Like some gothic artists, Vera Mantero and Rui Chafes also show in their works a tendency to transcend the ordinary and to subvert the notion of agreeable through the use of the inversion of an assumed normality, a process which allows them to reject affirmative, conformist culture and to embrace the mysterious, the negative, the subconscious and the unknown. Chafes justifies this posture defending that “There must be solitary souls, outcasts, madmen, nonconformist wolves with soul, who resist the alluring power of homogeneity”

(Chafes 257). Showing the same intense emotional reaction, Vera Mantero follows Jean Dubuffet's advice that we should see the things that surround us with different eyes. She observes that in her play *Sob* she concentrated herself on the idea of "monster" to show the necessity to look into ourselves to know what we do not usually like to see and say, what is obscure and even ugly, for the simple reason that we should not be afraid to experience a necessary disorder, since this fear prevents us from having access to intensity. A similar point of view is also common in gothic creativity, which usually displays a tendency to subvert the established structures of thought, as the English writer, Patrick MacGrath, noticed saying that "the Gothic tends always to assume this posture in relation to the dominant values of a culture. It negates. It denies. It buries in shadow that which had been brightly lit, and brings into light that which had been repressed" (Grunenberg 156). *Leçons de ténèbres* (2001) by Rui Chafes evokes that interior space where a secret life waits to be revealed, full of an embodied intensity where we can feel a radical division between the inside and the outside, as if his sculptures wanted to show the hidden side of things, or the soul of some creative objects, which led him to say that "I believe art can awaken secret powers in men, which reason cannot explain" (Chafes 255). The abstract forms of Rui Chafes and the transgressive dance of Vera Mantero can bring to the contemporary Portuguese artistic expression the wealth of philosophical and psychological insight that the Gothic also raised from the darkness of the unconscious.

The titles of some of their previous works are good examples of this possible association. *Dream of Death* (1993) by Chafes is a series of black iron parallelepipeds with a row of openings that show a dark inside where the light is interrupted as if they were coffins. *Poetry and Savagery* (1998) defines the unusual expressivity of the aesthetics of Mantero's dance bringing to the stage the scenery of a primitive ritual, or signs of an earthquake. Common to both

artists is the intention to reveal hidden meanings and to disturb the viewers and the audience with their creative doubts that try to maintain the balance that characterises the perceptive dichotomies of sensitiveness and intellect – as in the spontaneous choreographies of Mantero – or to preserve the constant interdependency between light and darkness as in *Dawn* and *Soft Dark Fear*. In this piece, an iron sphere was compared by Chafes to a black sun, thus highlighting the paradox that it is possible to create, in iron, delicate shapes that, in spite of being very heavy, are able to float above the ground searching for a freedom and transcendence only attainable through the imagination. When Mantero informs that her dance is philosophy, possessing a potential for creative destruction, where the grotesque play between laughter and pain creates an absurd carnival; and when Chafes assumes his dark romantic and melancholic sensitiveness saying that for him “there is no beauty without traces of death, separation and hurt” (Chafes 256), both artists are getting very close to that gothic spirit apprehended by Fred Botting, who concluded that “Gothic became part of an internalized world of guilt, anxiety, despair, a world of individual transgression interrogating the uncertain bounds of imaginative freedom and human knowledge” (Botting 10). This uncertainty expresses these artists’ belief that creativity is in part destructive, because things can become more beautiful at the point of destruction, showing that beauty and horror cannot exist except in contrast to each other, which creates and develops the concept of “terrifying beauty”, that can not only be applied to the gothic aesthetics, but also to the contradiction or to the battle between two art forms, in the case of Vera Mantero and Rui Chafes, two different artists that, in their dialectic relation, explore and reflect the contemporary Zeitgeist, but at the same time keep something eternal hidden in their works.

As a reflection of their interest in new forms of cognition that promote an unrestricted exercise of the imagination, Mantero and Chafes inquire into places

of exhaustion of the body, where they can be acquainted with several possibilities of self-knowledge that stem from a performative aesthetic. This is what Lea Vergine, in *Body Art and Performance*, considered a process of artistic investigation according to which “the body is stripped bare in an extreme attempt to acquire the right to a rebirth back into the world. Most of the time, the experiences we are dealing with are authentic, and they are consequently cruel and painful. *Those who are in pain will tell you that they have the right to be taken seriously*” (Vergine 8). These words remind us of the importance of suffering for Anthony Gormley, an artist who also considers the body an art and the primary language before verbal language, producing a work that is derived from real moments of lived time that are captured in plaster, saying that “they are all registers of moments of real being: witnesses to human existence, and they suffer but they also own their existence” (Gormley 129). According to this famous American sculptor, “to be is to endure and at least half of the endurance is pain”, because he insists that “all being is subject to ignorance and is bound to suffering” (Gormley 129). This shows that some good examples of contemporary art, associated in some way with the gothic aesthetics, continue to explore the negative pleasures of the sublime which, as Edmund Burke defined it in the eighteenth century, is “productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on pleasure” (Burke 39).

Assuming that pain is a central and recurring theme in his work, especially pain as a metaphor for the body, Chafes clarifies this perspective: “I believe art must hurt us, as death does. Art must be a radical cut. If art does not awake us, then it is not worth making it” (Chafes 256). Similarly, Vera Mantero moves towards the limit to provoke an explosion that could impress people in order to surprise them, not only by the unexpected, but also by many contrasts and dissonances. From this perspective, these two Portuguese artists approach a kind

of aesthetic terrorism which is based upon a vigorous opposition to the phenomena of elitist and consumer art, rejecting all its formulas and stereotypes. The need to search out painful and humiliating situations comes from the urgency Mantero also feels “to put the guts out” in order to turn the body inside out to show its fragilities and vulnerabilities, its inner face. This explains why the dance of resistance of Vera Mantero adapts itself so well to the organic forms of Rui Chafes, which seem to seek a body so meaningfully absent but so associated with the power of violence they possess for being connoted with instruments of war, torture and aggression. In the exhibition “The Vocation of Fear” (1990), Chafes presented a series of coats woven with iron whose double function of forming or deforming the body can never disguise the threat or trap they represent. The uncomfortable presence of death can be deeply felt in these works, which explains that for Chafes “the one who makes art speaks of death” and that “there is no beauty without traces of death” (Chafes 255), because he believes death keeps us awake and alive. The very origin of sculpture explains the importance of this central theme. In “Playing with Dead Things”, Mike Kelley reminds us that “the aura of death surrounds statues. The origin of sculpture is said to be in the grave; the first corpse was the first statue” (Kelley 177). According to Chafes, the conscience of death keeps us awake, and Mantero believes we need the arts not to die. Like in the performative art of Fried, Trotta and Rupperberg, the theme of death is so important in the works of these two Portuguese artists, because as Lea Vergine also concludes: “it’s a question of facing up to death through life, rummaging around in the under and seamy sides of life, bringing to light the *secret* and the hidden. Only by experimenting a little at a time with death does one come to understand a little bit more about life” (Vergine 9). The evocation of death in Mantero and Chafes can also be perceived as a gothic reference that expresses their desire to confront the viewers with their alienated bodies and death

wishes, showing them it is always very painful to know we are dead, which should develop in people their need for a lost spirituality in a rationalistic culture, where, according to Chafes, the artist should “resist against this digital, colored, transparent, flexible world”, so that he can “set a strategy of deceleration against the strategy of speed, a strategy of weight against a strategy of lightness” (Chafes 258). In *Contemporary Gothic*, Catherine Spooner also noticed this loss of corporeality in our time, which justifies some physical manifestations of Gothic in art through the creation of grotesque bodies, the fascination with freakishness based on performative notions of identity being that which tries to remake the self as monstrous as an “attempt to reinstate the physicality of the body in an increasingly decorporealized information society” (Spooner 29). This fact led Sally O’Reilly, in her work *The Body in Contemporary Art*, to defend the presence of the body in the art as a site of common physiological experience that makes it an excellent tool for inspiring empathy, concluding that in contemporary art not only is the presence of the audience acknowledged but the individual’s power to generate meaning is actively encouraged, as one abolishes the image of an impassive audience consuming static art infused with fixed meaning by an authoritative artist, which “has given way to a reciprocal and conditional situation in which ambiguity scuppers meaning, so that the artist, artwork and viewer together negotiate an intellectual and sensory experience” (O’Reilly 193).

From the artistic dialogue between Mantero and Chafes, in *Eating your Heart Out*, could only result an ambiguous and disturbing strangeness that was probably influenced by the choreographer’s aesthetic desire to activate turbulences and by the sculptor’s uncontrollable need to what Doris Von Drathen called “embodiments on the razor’s edge” (von Drathen 235). Here the concept of gothic uncanny is very much present, the title avoiding any kind of sentimentality in order to establish a dialogue with the other side of a familiar existence that can only be maintained through an endless dialectic confrontation

that is open to many contradictory possibilities which turn the whole work into a difficult or even impossible dialogue between a living person and a void or between a naked woman and an iron sculpture. To dance and move freely on top of a six-metre-high tripod is completely impossible, which means the dancer will be trapped and her movements limited, transforming her into a grotesque figure with her nakedness concealed beneath a web of plantlike, organic forms that look like the body's inner organs. Transformed into a hybrid monster made of woman and plant, the dancer is reduced to her lamenting voice that can express her awareness of the dangerous presence of a large balloon-like iron sphere that at any moment might suck up and carry away her body. One of the paradoxes consists in perceiving that the dancer is the heart of a sculpture that may devour her but without whom that iron figure cannot survive, being nothing more than a terrifying emptiness.

Entrapment and confinement are also very recurrent gothic themes, which demonstrates that some themes in contemporary art can be grounded in very famous novels and short stories from the eighteenth and nineteenth-century gothic literature. One of these good examples is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), regarded as an important work of American feminist literature that illustrated attitudes in the nineteenth century toward women's physical and mental health. Forbidden from working by her physician husband, the central character is a woman who narrates her confinement story in the first-person perspective, presenting many details of her descent into madness and psychosis caused by the effects of her entrapment in a strange place, which explains her obsessions by the pattern and color of the wallpaper:

It is the strangest yellow, that wall-paper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw – not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things. But there

is something else about that paper – the smell! ... The only thing I can think of that it is like is the *color* of the paper! A yellow smell (Gilman 97-98).

Believing in the power of writing, as Vera Mantero, and maintaining the routine of writing in a journal to recuperate from her “temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency” (Gilman 87), the woman in *The Yellow Wallpaper* seems to be a performer like Mantero, someone who exposes herself and magnifies or exteriorizes what it means to be a human being, stretching her voice, her body and her speech so that meaning can become visible through a scream that proclaims what can happen to human beings. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator’s hysteria, due to her descent into madness and to her entrapment, is similar to Mantero’s hysterical movements that express her helplessness when trying to get free from the sculpture that imprisons her. This proves that a huge and inhuman iron piece is more powerful than her female frailty, because it can repress her spontaneity and reduce her body to a moaning and groaning doll which seems to be driven by a puppeteer, one who proves as able to immobilise her body as a physician husband intent on keeping his anxious wife isolated in a room. Mantero’s movements of despair, which reveal her body debating itself between submission and insurrection, between conformity and subversion, are very similar to the efforts of a woman obsessed to free herself together with the figure of another woman, her double, who, she imagines, is hidden and creeping behind the pattern of the yellow wallpaper, trying to escape the bars from the shadows. Mantero’s gestures can be comparable, in their anguish and desire for freedom, to a woman who, after realizing she must try to free the woman in the wallpaper, begins to strip the remaining designs off the wall, peeling away the wallpaper and creeping around the room, circling the walls, while she exclaims “I’ve got out at last” (Gilman 110), after stepping over her husband’s inert body, who turned himself into a victim of his own ineffective

and cruel method of treatment. The woman's last words can be compared to Mantero's vocal sounds because both are experiencing a process of transcending the body and all its limitations. At the same time, they cry for freedom, trying to escape from all the stereotypes regarding the representation of women, as Mantero succeeded in doing in her solo *Olympia*, a version of Manet's emblematic figure of art that in his time appalled the public by the frontal nakedness that turned it into an artistic object of scandal. All these representations of women show them as figures out of place, condemned to be objects of scandal, that subvert all the stereotypes associated with the representation of the female figure, a subversion transformed into a very particular power which relates them to the Gothic for showing a special "inclination to transcend the ordinary" (Williams 15). Entrapment is also an inescapable condition of the bodies that dare inhabit Rui Chafes's sculptures, as Laurent Goumarre concludes in "Vera profundissime Olyimpia's truth", saying that "Chafes's sculptural work functioned as a trap for the bodies; as soon as the body slipped into his premises it would stop, take position, and repeat from the interior the form that it exposed to the exterior; contaminated, it became a living sculpture, but black, *en-fer-mée*, opaque" (Chafes and Montero 105).

Its desire for transcendence means that the Gothic signified a trend towards an aesthetics based on feeling and emotion and associated primarily with the sublime. Also regarded as an experience of sublimity caused by the resistance to representation due to its refusal to imitate an action or to reproduce an event, *Eating you Heart Out* can be read as a continuous and hysterical dramatization of the conflicts between desire and defense, license and prohibition, memory and resistance, castration and self-conservation, life impulses and death impulses, voyeurism and exhibition, impulses towards sadism and masochist pleasure, destructive fantasy and cathartic fantasy. The body is considered as a place of conflict that follows a strategy of subversive

expression which preserves its condition of unrepresentability to express the unutterable tensions between life and death or between beauty and terror. This happens because there is a common desire for authenticity on the part of these artists. If Chafes is interested in the soul of an object, for Mantero it is important to know how the human soul functions and what makes reality, to show a more authentic dimension which is not commonly perceived. Beauty is for her a synonym of “truth”, because she thinks truth is strangely beautiful even when it is cruel chaotic and wild. This aesthetic sensitiveness based on a negative sublimity is associated with the Gothic, because, as Patrick McGrath observes in his essay “Transgression and Decay”, “The Gothic consistently attempts to speak about the unspeakable – that is, death” (McGrath 154). Developing a very special interest for beautiful atrocities, Gothic reveals an implicit death wish easily perceived in its crumbling mansions and crumbling minds, which led McGrath to conclude that “in the Gothic we can safely look at the destructive energies we detect in the world around us, as well as in our psyches, and defuse the menace we discover there. The Gothic allows us to manage the nightmares of a world in which control seems increasingly tenuous” (McGrath 153). As we have been noticing, death is a central theme to these artists, whose works express what Mantero calls “an atrocious doubt”, also very present in gothic art, which led Christoph Grunenberg to conclude that “no longer concerned with the production of a grand and majestic terror, the gothic sublime today reflects a hesitant and apprehensive state of mind obscured by a deep fear of the unfamiliar future” (Grunenberg 160). Chafes and Mantero confront this feeling of an uncertain future by removing masks to try to destroy the artificial screen that separates the *public* from the *private* and showing what we keep hidden under our skin.

Eating your Heart Out is a collaborative sculpture that seeks to transcend the limits of the body, which can be a very good example for the transcendence

of the limits of art itself, underlining the importance of the transdisciplinary artistic practice that insistently these two Portuguese artists have been defending, by promoting a constant and infinite pollution and contamination between the arts, even defying the danger that they could devour each other to preserve the secret they create.

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