

Jochen Volz, 'Alexandre da Cunha "Boom" at Pivô, São Paulo', Mousse Magazine, 2017

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Alexandre da Cunha "Boom" at Pivô, São Paulo, 2017
Courtesy: Pivô, São Paulo. Photo: Everton Ballardin

CONVERSATIONS

Alexandre da Cunha "Boom" at Pivô, São Paulo

Alexandre da Cunha interviewed by Jochen Volz

Jochen Volz: You are preparing your solo exhibition at PIVÔ in São Paulo, and for the past two months you have been working in the galleries on new sculptures, paintings, and a video. One of the new works is Portal, a large metal sheet fixed to the wall on massive hinges. Having followed your practice for many years, this is a somewhat curious piece, new and unusual. You said that you found it as is, in a workshop of metal craftsmen who repair the drums of concrete mixers, another element often present in your work and in the exhibition. I think Portal serves beautifully as an entry point into your practice. On the one hand it is a readymade found object, with its own sculptural quality, the expressive cutouts reminding us of masks or of sewing patterns. On the other hand, it is characterized by ambiguity in terms of the quality of materials. It seems light, despite its weight. It appears soft and flexible like paper, rather than solid and resistant like steel. To play with the apparent versus the actual quality of materials is one of your consistent strategies. What triggers the transformation of the object into a work of art, into your sculpture?

Alexandre da Cunha: My working process is based on my observation of objects. I have been always intrigued by the massive amount of stuff one needs to live and the roles of objects in our surroundings. I am interested in the processes of design, manufacture, and distribution of them among ourselves. A great deal of my work consists of forcing myself to learn about the structures of ordinary objects and the narratives behind them, their cultural uses and their implications in society. The method of transformation or play with their appearance often happens through very subtle alterations; I believe this process has more to do with timing than physical intervention, though. It is about creating a platform and allowing the viewer to see something familiar from a privileged point of view.

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Portal was made during the months prior to the show in São Paulo. It is a good example of how the process at PIVÔ evolved as I was conceiving the exhibition. Despite its weight, it appeared naturally in the context of the show. It gradually took shape and found its own corner in the gallery. In this exhibition I had to listen to the works and obey them; the layout of the show was constantly challenged by the irregularity of the architecture. The pieces decided for themselves where they wanted to be displayed; I did my best to trust them.

Portal is a found sheet of metal that was cleaned, cut in two sections, and adjusted to a niche on the wall through the use of very strong hinges. I wanted to highlight the qualities of the material as well as the residual beauty imprinted in the metal sheet, forms and cuts made by someone else where the expression of the gesture is one of denial in the name of productivity. At the factory the metalworker produces as many shapes as they manage to squeeze onto one sheet. The cutouts go somewhere else as patches to repair other surfaces and the remaining sheets are discarded. By freezing this process I open an entry to different readings of the work and bring to the fore that narrative of intense physical labor that is the core of the work. I like your reference to pattern cutting. My mother worked professionally for many years as a pattern cutter, as a child I remember being at her studio and always finding magical the transformation of flat shapes into garments. I am sure that played a role in my interest in sculpture.

JV: The selection of pieces presented at PIVÔ seems to clearly reference very distinct fields of manual labor: construction work, cleaning, sewing, and metal and marble workshops, to name a few. What do you look for in exploring the diversity of crafts?

AdC: I like to reference other activities that have a link to what I do. I would like to challenge their similarities and discrepancies. Part of my routine in the studio is very laborious, repetitive, and demanding, and physically quite tiring. On the other hand I enjoy the freedom of managing my own rhythms and not being under the pressures of a factory worker.

In making sculptures with cleaning mops, for example, I am interested in the qualities of the mop as a textile, but I'm also referencing the labor of workers who use them as tools in their jobs. I don't intend to make a social statement with it, but I am interested in this narrative that my work can make someone stop and think about that object, how it is constructed and how it is used in everyday life.

The relationship with other fields, and specially crafts, is something I have been exploring for a while. Perhaps it is an attempt to bring my practice closer to other occupations that have a more practical function in society.

JV: There is the small-scale painting *Morning XVIII* made of stretched T-shirt cotton and a rubber scraper, and there is *Mix (Boom)*, consisting of a giant concrete mixer drum cut into four pieces. This is quite a significant span, from an object that is the scale of your hand and one that is the scale of your body. What is the significance of scale of your work?

AdC: I have always worked with intimate, small objects and large structures at the same time. One thing that both gestures have in common is the relationship with the body, as I use lots of functional devices and domestic objects that have handles, hooks, clothing, et cetera. I suppose the significance of my own body as a scale of working comes from the immediacy of my encounter with these things in everyday life. It is somewhere between grabbing and contemplating, and the many shades in between. Some of the objects are picked immediately and joined together; others are perceived as expansive structures, like *Mix (Boom)*. Some of them belong to the domestic environment; others are part of the urban landscape. Part of my practice with objects is to play with possible inversions of those points of view. Very often I don't do much to the materials, but I make the viewer look at those banal things as if they were monumental or the other way around. In this process the body plays an important role—both my body as a maker and the viewer as a player.

JV: The exhibition is named *Boom*, which besides referencing the title of the large concrete-mixer sculpture, clearly relates to the silent video *Contratempo*, which consists of a montage of found footage of explosions. But what intrigues me most is that you have chosen to start the exhibition with the work *Straight Jacket* from 2002. This collaged object made of found materials is a highly charged sculpture about the

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status of art and your own practice as an artist. And here I see a interesting tension that you establish about concentration and potentials, expansiveness and constraint, the transformative capacity of art and the limiting powers of the markets, operating between booms and busts. Do you see subversion as a strategy within your practice?

AdC: I see subversion as a natural aspect of the role of any artist. It is what we as artists do all the time. Sometimes this manifests itself in a subtle way, sometimes less so. In the last decade, the art world took a drastic turn and became too specialized, so perhaps it is harder to see that aspect in most artists' practices, but I believe subversion is the core of creation. Artists are today valued as currency, and their real motivations are often masked by exposure, public recognition, prizes, and a lot of distractions. On the other hand I am aware that I have been able to develop my practice because of that same machine. That system generated more money, funding, and information, and got more people involved. It is a challenge for an artist of my generation to learn to navigate this mess and make work that is relevant. Explosions and a straightjacket are not the most typical subjects in my repertoire, but I thought it was the right time to evoke those images and explore such highly charged subjects.