

BOMB

1 January 2008

Fernanda Gomes and Ernesto Neto



Fernanda Gomes, *Sem Título (Untitled)*, 2004, wood

Fernanda Gomes is one of the most interesting artists of my generation. We have been in many shows together over the last 20 years, but her work is completely different from mine. Gomes makes art with all kinds of leftover materials: everyday objects, old furniture (old not in the sense of antique, but polished by time), glasses, little mirrors, little magnets, many different kinds of string, hair, cigarette ends, coins, branches, newspapers, letters, words—as she says in this interview, “things.” If she is using a product with a design or logo on its surface, she certainly will take it off, bringing the object back to its own structure, to its identity —unless there is some subtle image or text on it that might match some poetic point and add some context to her “thing.”

Sometimes there is no change to the object, no interference, nothing like another object added to it, but there is a relation from it, to the context of the environment she creates in the studio or the gallery. Her approach is pretty open, but rigorous. Gomes has been very active with exhibitions worldwide, in museums and galleries and in biennials.

The interview was conducted over five days this fall, by email.



Fernanda Gomes's studio, Rio de Janeiro, 2006

Fernanda Gomes: Yes, start from the beginning: empty page, empty space, empty mind? I try often to blank my mind, and then move, randomly, look and wait, just do something vague and unimportant, keep on moving, looking, moving, not for any result, simply playing with things.

What for?

To live in attention and action, anyway. To search for a certain awareness of being somewhere, and to try to enlarge this perception, as a stone thrown in the water, concentric circles, until space expansion reaches time, in the prosaic idea of the moment itself.

Yes, and if I persevere in this game, certainly something will happen, something that will deserve attention, and I will follow this way.

The thing produced from this process frequently appears precarious, even when it's solid and huge, no matter the material. It's all about the immaterial, anyway. The paradox is that the immaterial must be created from material, it must materialize, which is what really counts: the autonomy of the thing itself.

The magic that transforms stone into poetry nobody can explain. Even when you get there, the way remains mysterious.

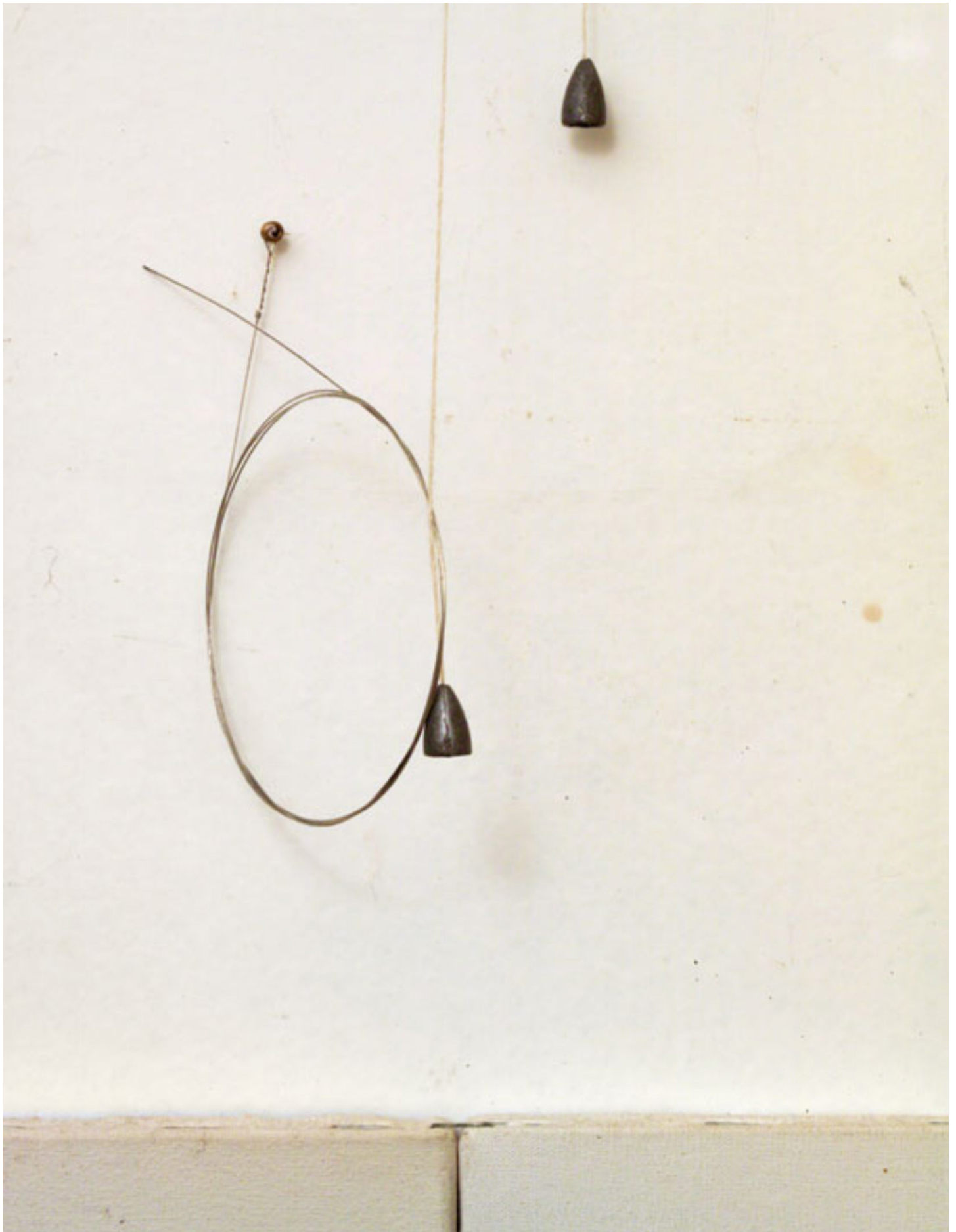
This is not important, except that it is possible to continue. Writing about art seems to me more and more dangerous. There are too many words troubling the wonderful silence of the visual.

Words are too dangerous to be supplementary. Poetry would be the ideal solution, but poetry is equally useless for what is asked. Explaining what one sees is either literary or redundant. Maybe formulating questions with no possible answers would reach the essence of the artistic praxis.

Ernesto, I would like to ask you some basic questions, more or less the ones I ask myself. What do you think you are doing when you start a work? And what do you think when it is finally there, and you are standing there looking at it?

Ernesto Neto: Well, I don't know exactly what I think when I begin a work. In fact, I don't like to start a work! Generally, I do everything I can to run away from that moment, so for me it is not a question of thinking. When I see it, I'm already doing it—I guess it happens when there is nothing left to do other than get to work. I have always thought art appears in this moment. It is a difficult moment, because that is really when there is everything to do! At that point I'm able to create an emptiness to let the art spirit come through. It is not easy to create this space; I would even say that from time to time we can't control it. Maybe we create conditions of possibility, but art is always around, always surrounding us, everywhere.

And what do I think when it is finally there? It depends very much on the type of work it is. Some of them take a very long time and involve a process of making in which I just keep going until there is literally nothing else I can add, or even until I begin to forget about the piece. It just begins to go away, or the time for it is gone. Of course this period of time is not fixed; it's something that the piece and I determine together. Other works are different. Sometimes we have a project, and we produce it, but it really happens when we install it: All the parameters are "under control," but when we put it up and let gravity work on it, we finally see what happens, and that suggests that we change something. But in general it is what it is. Often there are surprises, and it turns out differently. Sometimes it takes a while for me to digest it. The art always plays with me. But finishing the work is not really a problem as long as I don't mind accepting the truth that it's just beyond my little self. (Actually I think that everything is not really finished, and I do mean everything!) To begin is the biggest problem. To finish is a relief! Then I look at it as if I am somebody in the audience. I would love not to be me, to see what I do! In fact I just would like not to be myself for a while. Maybe that's why people dance, as a way to be outside themselves; maybe not to be is more comfortable than to be, but—



Fernanda Gomes's studio, Rio de Janeiro, 2006

FG Why do these things? For whom? What for?

EN I do what I like to do, even though sometimes it causes me so much suffering that I say I will never do something like that again, but I always do, many times over. I like to test the limits, be at risk. Many times when a work is installed at an exhibition space it is the first time it has been made, and since the work deals with a lot of tension and heavy weight—holding material, there is always a balance, a feeling of being close to a catastrophe. I have experienced some and been very close to some big ones. We have a very short time to make all the decisions and we are working and learning at the same time. For me, the exhibition space is an extension of the studio, fresh paint. It's always a private adventure. I think there is a level of tension that I can't live without. The lightness comes from the fight. When you look at the piece there is a certain degree of lightness, but there is a strong energy of conflict between the elements involved. To have this whole environment in a state of balance, there is a power negotiation between the parts and an atmosphere of interdependence. Making this kind of work is like being a conductor, administrating the polarities.

I don't think I do art for anybody, I haven't found my *Dulcinea*, but sometimes there is one person here, one there, sometimes somebody who is working with me ... And some of the pieces are for people in general, for everybody, but it seems so easy to say me, you, us. I think I'm going blind, I like to smell and let the people smell, and I'm not talking about spices, but atmospherically, musically. It's a way to see, but once again—for nobody, not even for me.

You ask what for? It's funny but if you ask my close friends, what is the sentence that Neto says a lot, they would say “Vivê? Pra quê?” which could be translated as, “Live? What for?” And I don't know the answer!

Now, Fernanda, you and I have been in many exhibitions together, and sometimes you work at night, or even sleep in the gallery. Is this an important part of your process?

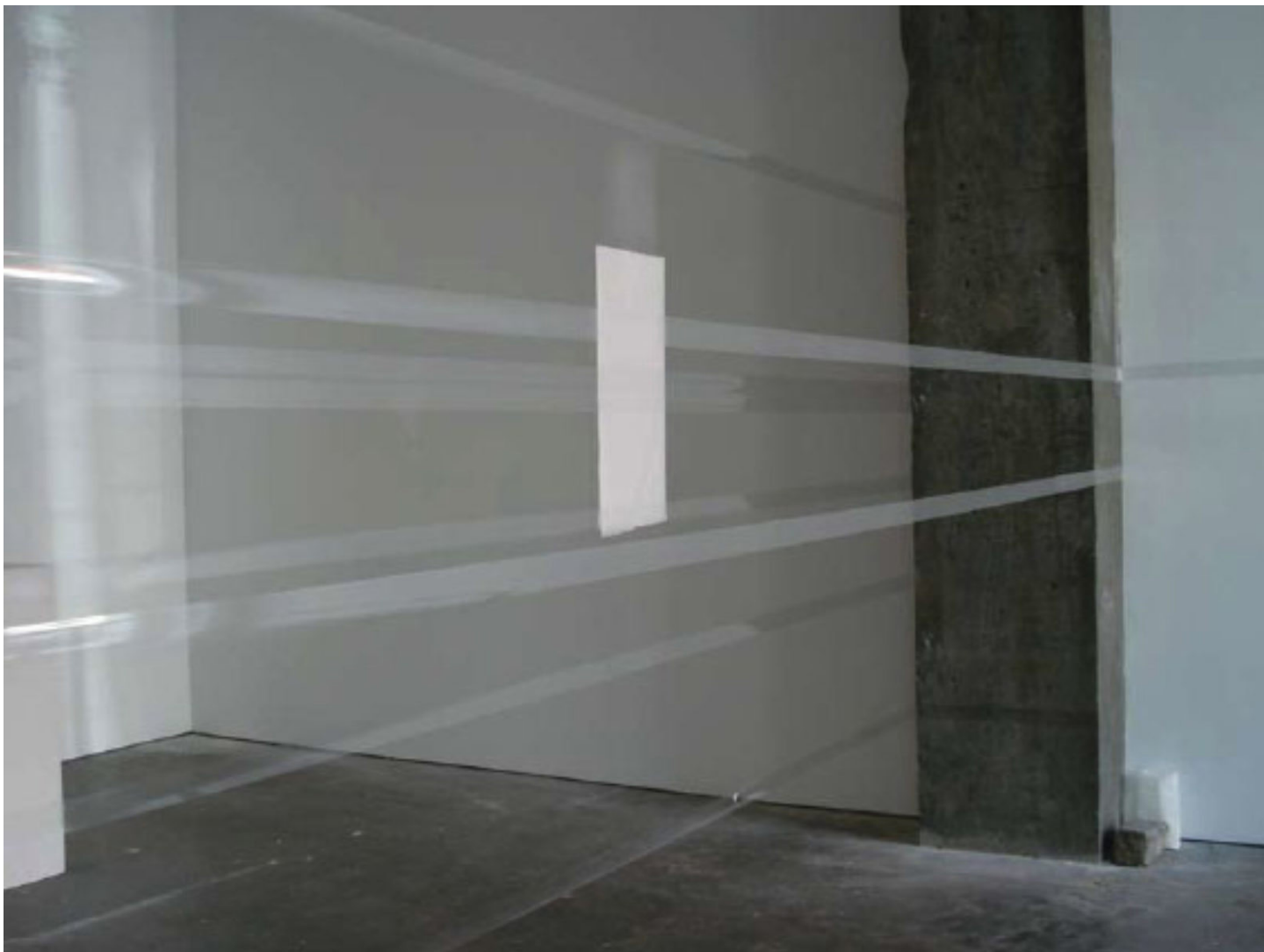
FG I used to like working at night because of the quietness and the isolation. Being alone at the gallery was like being at home. I work at home, not in a studio, which makes me at the same time aware and dispersed, full-time inside the work, organically. Since the beginning I've always tried to transfer the working process I have at home to a public space. Trying to keep things fresh and linked to the place as if it were made there.

The idea, or the impression, of a product for sale in a shop still horrifies me. Yes, it's a product—it's even for sale—but you can own it without having the object, by keeping it in your mind.

The process itself becomes the object of intense investigation and exercise, especially when I'm preparing an exhibition. I like to arrive with bare hands, not even bringing a plan. I can't avoid having many ideas. Fortunately there are too many, so it becomes no idea.

I concentrate myself in full dispersion. I try to be where I am, present in the moment. When I succeed, I feel good like a perfect animal, everything fits, there is no search for sense, I just can see things as they are and play with them as I like. Then I leave, rest, sleep. Sleeping is very important, the ideal pause, sometimes revealing. Coming back the next day I see things strangely different. This process needs a succession of days, one day after the other, creating a dynamic of opposite movements. Sometimes it's weird, I see no sense in doing anything. Constructing the true disposition of doing something is the real work.

I never slept in a gallery—I took the nighttime to work and slept during the day. Nowadays I prefer working during the day, with daylight.



EN Let's talk about the materiality of your work. You always begin your installations and assemblages with ordinary objects that surround us, matchboxes, teabags, old tables, benches, chairs, and pieces of newspaper. How do you choose these objects?

FG I just see them, touch them; things are all around us.

I choose one or another, according to the situation, as a token or starting point, so as to have something in hand.

It's better to do something, especially if it is useless, especially if it is related to beauty.

Make something to have the material proof of the action.

We could easily map our lives from objects; they trace our movement, in the most prosaic way.

I still dream that every object could be significant, that beauty could be everywhere.

"The object is simple."

EN These answers remind me of the pictures you showed me from an exhibition of your work last year in New York. The room looked very old—no white walls—and it was very empty, except for about 16 objects on the floor. Some of them looked like they were hanging from the ceiling, or as if there was a vertical line/branch going up from them to the ceiling. It's very difficult to recognize the objects; we have the feeling that they activate the space around them, or maybe they activate the emptiness of the whole space. I believe that even though there is this general view, the particularity of each of these objects would attract and “drive” the movement of the viewer looking at each one and moving his or her body and attention as these small positions demand. In that show you had elements falling in a big space, floating in it, and I am wondering, do you see your sentences as floating sculptures? Do you see your work as sculpture?

FG Yes, I see my work as sculpture, drawings, paintings, but mainly as things. This imprecise word “things” is my favorite for what I do, even if they are, yes, sculptures, drawings, painting, et cetera. The relation between things, and between things and space is very important. I can't avoid seeing what is supposed to not be seen. Every space is so full of information, even a white wall.

When writing I can't avoid giving a lot of importance to the page itself, the precise white of each paper, the forms of the letters, the blank spaces. A text is also a kind of drawing for me.

I also can't avoid seeing sculpture as drawing or painting as sculpture.

A painting is an object, and the materiality of the canvas, the thickness of the wooden stretcher, the minimal shadow proves its materiality. All this is very important in the way I see not only art, but the common things too.

One of the best things about contemporary art is the possibility that opens toward a vision of the world. Not everything can be art, but everything can contain beauty. Poetry and literature maybe had made this possible before, but in visual arts the operation is direct.

EN I can see in your two last answers that beauty is a very important concept to you in your work and in your life. I would like to talk to you about that, but first, I'm very interested in this idea of things. When I think of you, I always think about the atmosphere of your house and especially that incredible room that is your studio. It's a common room typical of Copacabana '50-'60s architecture; there are some pieces of old modern office furniture, with many flat drawers, and others with small drawers full of many kinds of little things, parts of things, it looks a bit chaotic but every little drawer has a kind of subject, family: spools of thread, magnets, cutout newspaper words, glasses, stamps, rubber bands, old tools full of personality, history; others with flat shelves, with drawings, coffee drawings; then tables, boxes, different bigger objects, interesting benches, besides many “things” hanging from the ceiling or on the wall. When you open the closet there is another bunch of objects hanging from the rod, and more paper drawings, and drawers, with special “things” like for example some skins, or “sheets” made of hair and very thin silk thread taken from some old silk fabric. Tell us, what is this place? What does it represent for you?

FG The house is the place where it's possible to create a way of living that is closer to the imagination, to be alone or in chosen company, to be naked, in every sense.

It is the ideal place to do things, and also to keep things.

Maybe the house is the natural place for humans to create, since prehistoric times. Even the caves had drawings.

I need to have everything mixed, I cannot have scheduled times for work and rest. Maybe I rest better when I work. I like to have things that go from the kitchen to a gallery and then back to the kitchen again. As I said, I can concentrate better in dispersion. I like to observe how things happen. I nourish myself from these small actions of everyday life, when thoughts are independent of action, and suddenly things match. Nothing happens most of the time. I need a huge amount of this nothing to produce a bit of something.

I like to see sculptures half-asleep and paintings in the dark.

Yes, I like to think about beauty; it's more complex than experiencing beauty. Writing about beauty is almost impossible. That's why I try to do it. I like the idea of surrounding a thing that I will never grasp. Maybe that's why I do art.

Searching for beauty is natural, the question is: which beauty?

Beauty is not visual. Beauty is mental.

Search for beauty where it's not supposed to be.

Search for beauty everywhere.

All colors of white, all colors of black, light, dark; this can be beauty.

Under the microscope everything is beautiful!

Yes, beauty can be everywhere.

Tell me something about beauty.

EN Beauty is a very important concept and I agree very much with your way of seeing it. Beauty is so important in our society that it can be used to control people, and there are many people in the art world who fear it so much that it cannot be accepted as a parameter for judgment. But beauty will be there, it's everywhere, in every action! So how to evaluate it? Beauty is not an objective value. Any decision of how things should be defines beauty, and the more you try to avoid it, the closer it is. Personally I see beauty as an ethical position; publicly, I see it as a political position. Beauty is power, it's the power that defines what beauty is. Do you remember the slogans "Black is beautiful" and "Black power"? When Picasso destroyed the figure's face decades ago, he might have been avoiding beauty, but he generated a new parameter of beauty. When Duchamp put the urinal in the exhibition as a fountain, it was beauty—or, to be more recent, when Nan Goldin shows the bruises on her face made by her boyfriend, it renovates a beauty pattern; it's not beautiful, but it generates an excitement by the intimacy it reveals. When an artist, an art critic, a magazine, a biennial, takes an aesthetic position, it redefines beauty, intentionally or not. Beauty is like a shadow of our action. As an artist, when I work, I don't think about beauty; it happens as a consequence. I think beauty is an internal state of the spirit. Or at least, I try to keep this alive, because, on the other hand, it is not so interesting when people appear in the magazines; they don't look so beautiful, young, healthy—or intelligent!

FG It's hard to acknowledge that the system, both of art and of society, creates an aesthetic standard so far from aesthetics and ethics that not even the word "beauty" will fit into it. Maybe the possibility of confrontation in this context is to invest more and more energy into making artworks—material and autonomous artworks.

EN I think this talk of beauty can be useful, but Fernanda, you work with cigarette butts and abandoned furniture. How can you find beauty, or even value, in these discarded things?

FG Rejected things, too used or useless, or insignificant, frequently are impregnated with some degree of our humanity. The state of things on their way to disappearing appeals to me: they have a strange density in contrast to their precarious materiality.

EN In your work, I have seen the relationship of “things” built in many different ways. Do you see some particular and practical structures that connect “things” in your practice?

FG Connect fragments, and not only materially. Things happen simultaneously; maybe it is also an attempt to structure thinking and action.

EN The media understands the power of the image; it does not matter very much what you are doing if you are beautiful! It’s funny to think that we can be so vulnerable to this kind of vulgarity—and by the way, thinking about our times, when we talked on the phone you were telling me about your visit to the FIAC art fair. You noticed the artists from the Louvre courtyard section, which showed the younger contemporary galleries, were especially enjoying the section with the more established contemporary galleries at the Grand Palais. Would you like to talk about that?

FG I’d rather use the remaining space to write the word BEAUTY