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## A SEVEN-HEADED MONSTER

JOSÉ AUGUSTO RIBEIRO

Erika Verzutti's sculptures are not only representations, but also shape sensations and fantasies. They want to be delights and horrors, while evoking a beast or monster, resembling a playful, utilitarian or ritualistic object, having fruits and vegetables cast in bronze or concrete incorporated to their own physical composition. However, on doing so, they want to overturn and combine these and other objects and materials to construct active and unresolvable units that cannot be apprehended by a single identity or meaning. Each figure is unique and contains others: a tripod of tree branches contains an ostrich; a jackfruit, a solid with a sliced geometric figure; and a structure made of two coconuts and a bunch of bananas cast in metal, a female silhouette and an African mask. It is initially amazing that, from a few operations with ordinary elements, these pieces take on a suggestive power capable of articulating that which categories, realms, and classes separate in the domains of art, nature and social life. Furthermore, they are experiments with weights, consistencies, textures, contours, colors, sheen and temperature that contribute to induce contradictory stimuli and require viewers to use a tactile and possibly gustatory gaze for an almost synesthetic perception. What arises thereof is as composite as the work itself: it involves humor, beauty, eroticism, estrangement, and violence, all at once. Put in another way, the work is succulent and acid and sweet and sour and bitter, in several senses.

As products of the libido, these sculptures also seem full of whims. Not by chance, they acquire heterogeneous shapes. Perhaps it is no overstatement to say they are endowed with behavior, judging by the malleability, movement, and internal animation they suggest. Somewhat tottering and rather clumsily, they take on horns, snout, big ears and long neck; they cast feathers, hairs, spots, tail, paws and genitalia, skin, pulp, stalk and pit. They take on a

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bold organic character and, in a strange biological existence, give hints of being porn movie stars, theme park attractions, or indicate a disposition to rest on a bookcase shelf, a living room coffee table, a kitchen, outdoors, or in the museum. They use the tools of artistic education, brushes, paints, modeling clay, spatulas. Some have their own pedestals, others re-make a Pablo Picasso ([Fig. II] 1881-1973), a Tarsila do Amaral (1886-1973), a Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957), a Sergio Camargo (1930-1990)... Some wear skirts; others apply makeup, rest, kiss, and die. On condition that, ultimately, they can retain fresh, tentative and forever provisional forms.

This vitalism of Verzutti's production could only emerge from her aplomb, an ability to be at ease that is by nature liberalizing, both in dealing with materials and in ways of appearing in public. The work does not aspire to any kind of perfection and those aspects that are seemingly primitive in fact lack innocence, and are even somewhat mischievous. Apart from preparing bronze and concrete, the procedures used to make these sculptures are basic and do not require any specific skills. They do involve juxtaposing and stacking components, modeling simple shapes, stretching out thin ones, rounding out bulges, pinning or printing objects on pieces of clay — all of them tasks that an apprentice or a beginner could easily manage. However, they are being executed to take liberties, breach protocols and undermine so-called learned standards. They are meant to make way for the colloquialism and insolence of a work the language of which is out-of-kilter with the supposedly edifying character of culture – whether it be a circumspect and stage-voiced expression, an accessory activity to doing good, or a pastime that conveys “useful” teachings.

The figures are not only ambiguous but also crooked, uneven and unstable, apparently liable to being inverted. They would be merely awkward, were it not for their graciousness and garb, as for example in *Avestruz* [Ostrich] (2008), *Henry* (2008), *Painted lady* (2011) and *Romana* [Roman] (2011). Most of the works start with a precarious assemblage of their components, their fragile equilibrium and uncomfortable supports, in which the appearance of a temporary or variable solution prevails. Others are simply arranged with independent parts set loose in space and in relation to each other. And this is how they prefer to remain, hesitant and available, rather than adopt schematics that may crystallize categorical statements, well-established positions and, therefore, convenience. No, not at all. Their finishings are quick and smeared, particularly in manual processes involving clay and paint. They reveal the urgency of the gestures, arbitrary hunches and wagers, and deliberations to resolve impasses. Resolutions that leave obvious traces of the actual artmaking, dents and fingerprints, and contingencies related to the use of pasty media, notwithstanding virtuosités, conditionings, or possibilities of absolute control or efficiency.

The same instances are found in Verzutti's surface painting, with partial filling – unfinished, actually – subdividing parts in specific applications of color: here for producing stains and effects; there, for retouching and detailing; at

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times, with powerful sweeping moves; at times, painstakingly. Laborious but also a pleasurable adventure, between irresponsibility and dedication, without hiding hesitations, mistakes, accidents (some of them slyly intended), or entanglement with decorative motifs and other extravagances. The work does not believe in pure spontaneity but is rather concerned to attain conditions to be spontaneous – so that dirty, crude and rough components may also be seen as planned and meticulous, so that delicate motifs affecting ornamentation retain their air of being improvised and intuitive. The fact is that rough edges and this yet-to-be-finished appearance help keep shapes feverishly open-ended. As if the material somehow came to a damp surface while still being dried, with the latent, exuberant process, and decisions posed in guesswork. Until further notice, nothing is calcified; nothing is final or finished in its present state. The work refuses to consider itself ready.

One of the key features of Verzutti's oeuvre is the suspension of certainties arising from its exploring opposite senses far from harmony rules, yet with intricate reconciliations. The means used to achieve this may be physical, optical, or psychological. They involve how the images are made, iconography conceived from composite ready-made shapes, the game of recognition of parts and the whole, the jumps between memory of materiality, previous functions and social positions of these things that the work appropriates, and their new materialization, between memory and its actualization; between false and real, original and copy. The operations of representation again attest to this principle of reversibility by revealing an animal or a penis or vagina instead of the shapes of an eggplant, a zucchini or a papaya. Sometimes it is the work title that leads viewers to look at a pile of white stones and see hairballs of a poodle (*Poodle* 2008), or look at dozens of watermelons made from green-dyed concrete, heaped on the floor, and see helmets of soldiers killed in battle (*Battle*, 2010) – witticism and melancholy coexist in this breadth of images. Other Verzutti pieces create temporal ellipses so instantaneously that they are unsettling, like her sculptures that allude to the distant past, to an Egyptian sarcophagus (*Egito*, 2008), or the Paleolithic Venus of Willendorf (*Vênus*, 2009), although they are sparkly, exuberant and warm. Or like the works that resemble a prehistoric fossil, an piece from antiquity, a geological cross-section and, without warning, a makeup kit, a creamy substance, a chunk of meat, a crystal, or a flower (*Palette*, 2012, *Pink photo frame*, *Gérbera*, *Livro de criança*, *Funcional*, *Grutinha com cone*, *Vale do amanhecer*, all from 2013). These works convey the idea that they are untimely and would be so in any period; that they are inadequate for any context, even while acting in “contemporaneity” in as much as they challenge assumptions about the present.

Whereas a representation with ready-made shapes calls to mind Picasso's *Bull's Head* (1943), which the artist made by attaching a bicycle saddle to a handlebar, one has to remember that viewing a work by Verzutti is not looking at an everyday object. It is to look at a piece of bronze shaped like an everyday object, a mediation that has retained the volume of the fruit intact while transforming it into a traditional sculptural material. The

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FIG. VI  
ERIKA VERZUTTI  
JASPERA NA ESCOLA / JASPERA AT SCHOOL,  
2006-08



FIG. VII  
JASPER JOHNS  
PAINTED BRONZE, 1960

operation is coincidental with Picasso's, whether simultaneously composing and decomposing a figure (and the process of forming an image starts by deforming it), or competently transfiguring certain objects in a way that they suggest something else. However, the artists here have taken opposite paths. From his first cubist collages in 1912, Picasso introduced into the field of art a number of materials that were not part of the tradition. In her turn, Erika gives everyday objects a chance to trans-mutate to perennial materiality rather than the perishable nature of foods, which does not elevate anything to the status of nobility. Incidentally, Verzutti created her own version of Picasso's Bull's Head, which she titled *Boi* ([Fig. I], 2007), which she made by joining a sweet potato to two cassava roots cast in bronze, and then painting part of the head like Portuguese chinaware, and one of the horns with stripes...

Thus, rather than undoing or hovering over hierarchies and value judgments designating greatness or triviality, low-brow image, invention, vulgarity or elegance, "past" or "current", "modern" or "contemporary", avant-garde or kitsch, her work sets them all wide open. It simultaneously exposes aspects of private or even domestic life, and the public dimension of art, without subjugating or placing one thing on the same level as another. On the contrary, the work asserts the autonomy of art against normative models of the world by keeping away from instrumental reason, far from practical or moral purposes, and as redoubts of a rebellious subjectivity that get involved with specificities of language itself, not in a protected, privileged, or superior field, but in attrition with other instances of life.

When reprocessing the history of art, for example, Verzutti's work extracts from it an authenticity for its existence, a self determination rather than a commentary or an interpretation about artists, works, schools, or styles. The reference to a piece by Maria Martins (1894-1973) or Jasper Johns ([Fig. VII] 1930) eventually relativizes the "new" and highlights recurrences in Verzutti's production, procedures, vocabulary, grammar, and mimicry system. So much so that the allusion to Maria Martins is a three-legged animal too (*Maria*, 2007) and her Jasper Johns version is a pineapple (*Jaspera* [Fig. VI], 2006-2008) instead of a can of Savarin coffee.<sup>1</sup> A kind of two-fold representation, ready to take chapters of art history out of their institutional fields and engage them with ideas and analyses that set store by delirium and informality. A thought that happily establishes correspondence between the cylindrical stumps of Sergio Camargo's reliefs and the contiguous arrangement of pieces of cucumbers (*Pepinos*, 2008, and *Banco*, 2013).

<sup>1</sup> Verzutti often describes references to works like these as "encyclopedic", in the sense that they are emblematic works of certain production and their reproduction circulates widely in books and periodicals, specialized or not. The statement ends by emphasizing the artist's more emotional than analytical relationship with their choices.



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In short, all contents of interest for her work are equally relevant. Or rather, contents usually rated as “sober” or “superficial”, “high” or “low” coexist without anything being over or under-valued. This is especially clear in Verzutti’s recent production or, at least, in her work since 2007. In the immediately previous works, from 2004 to 2006, which are perhaps the weakest in her oeuvre, she was testing the limits of a narrow repertoire of images, figures that come close to each other beforehand, bordering on kitsch. They are paintings on MDF shaped like dresses (*Marajoara*, 2004, *Tigresa*, 2005, and *Loba*, 2006) with a proliferation of beach scenes, sunsets, butts in bikinis, exotic plants and wildlife, tropical fruits, in dead-end reiterations – lacking unexpected clashes between different materials, without dangerously transitioning between overused and vigorous elements, as the artist has indeed been doing for some time now.

This circumscription of a stereotyped domain does not extend to all of Verzutti’s early production. Although she held her first solos and took part in group exhibitions in galleries and public institutions in the mid-1990s,<sup>2</sup> it was only in the following decade that she wrought a forceful and unique physiognomy for her work. Particularly with what she calls “vases” (Fig. III), made from crumpled papers “molded” to form a vertical volume hardly able to remain vertical in a clump that looks like a bouquet of flowers in a vase. These papers contain “behind-the-scenes” news about the art circuit (lists of works, accounts, institutional correspondence, phone numbers for artists, museums, collectors etc.)<sup>3</sup> that the artist collected at an art-gallery office while producing these pieces (2001–2002). Subsequently, in 2003, Verzutti repeated these exercises of verticalizing materials, this time using unfired clay to make small and fragile pieces shaped as vases (*Vaso chinês* and *Bombom*, 2004, *Vaso com bico and Rainha*, 2005), a volcano (*Vulcãozinho*, 2003), a foot in a plaster cast (*Gesso*, 2003), a swan (*Cisne*, 2003), and a figure (*Tarsila*, 2003) based on the gently curving vegetation of Tarsila do Amaral’s painting *Sol poente* (1929) that reappears in 2011 (*Tarsila com laranja* and *Tarsila com novo*). Perhaps it was in early 2000, then, that she developed her liking for erecting these long, thin phallic shapes – their posture insistently affording an air of being endangered or breakable – that continue to feature in part of her work, along with frictions that disrupt previous divisions between being a showcase figurine or taking part in the stalemates of art history.

<sup>2</sup> Erika Verzutti earned her degree in Product Design at Universidade Mackenzie, in São Paulo, in 1991. Her first solo show was in 1995, as part of a program of exhibitions at Centro Cultural São Paulo featuring early-career artists.

<sup>3</sup> In circulating news from the art circuit at exhibitions, the work recalls *Foi um prazer* or *Nice to meet you*, by Jac Leirner (1961), which consisted of business cards that she spent years collecting. The cards printed for art circuit professionals such as curators, gallery owners, artists, collectors etc. are seen in Leirner’s work organized in a line, beside each other, in the order of their graphical elements. While *Nice to meet you* (negritos) features cards that have words or letters in bold type, *Foi um prazer* (geométrico) contains geometrically shaped cards, and so on. Verzutti’s paper vases are somewhat similar. *Vaso chinês* (2001) joins papers printed or written in blue. *Samambaia* (2004) with marker highlighted sections and so forth.

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FIG. VIII  
 ERIKA VERZUTTI  
 SARAMANDAIA, 2006

However, no matter how dubious these structures may be, or how many different parts constitute each of them, they are built to sustain an organism, a situation, ultimately a unit – a problematic unit, for sure, but one of undisputed particularity. Verzutti's oeuvre formalizes this pursuit of synthesis in pieces such as *Saramandaia* ([Fig. VIII], 2006), an unlikely gathering of small sculptures in a vase, of all things. These miniatures eloquently comprise models from classical statuary (a bust), decorative objects (a swan's head), and a certain repertoire of modern anthropomorphic sculpture (with elements after Henry Moore [1898-1986]) under a TV soap opera title.<sup>4</sup> Another example, *Indigentes* (2008) has cobblestones under fragments of sculptures that “did not turn out right”, at least separately, to organize a whole number of unresolved difficulties, failures and upsets at ground level, in the gutter. In their turn, the sculptures titled *Bicho de sete cabeças* (2007–2010) express the raw state of this desire for a work to be something multiple and indivisible: monstrous for its idea of taking on different configurations concomitantly, or incorporating “heads” drawn by other artists,<sup>5</sup> in a body irreducible to mere congruencies or incongruences. The outcomes refuse to be the sum of the things that the artist brings together, or to be only one or other of these things, to connect independences and reciprocities in a uniquely complex form that defies labeling.

Perhaps this pursuit of syntheses may also explain the motivation behind her oeuvre to present itself by means of a consonance of figures and procedures at each new exhibition – just as this book divides five years of her production, from 2008 to 2013, into sections according to affinity. The work does seem to establish a set of rules for creative work and, within those principles, to establish conditions for freedom in attacking materials. The solo exhibition “*Pet Cemetery*”,<sup>6</sup> for example, evoked pets' graves as variant of sculptural language, from its title to the prevailing attendance of bronze sculptures and tombstones, in pieces that could be displayed as if they were buried

<sup>4</sup> *Saramandaia* was a TV soap opera that Globo TV aired in 1976, written by Dias Gomes (1922-1999), a Rio de Janeiro-based writer from Bahia. It was hailed for experimenting with features from literary magical realism or fantastic realism, since the lead characters were ordinary people with unusual traits (such as the teacher who turns into a werewolf, or a councilman who has wings on his back) involved in inexplicable situations, and also for its language replete with metaphors and symbols. Dias Gomes also wrote *O pagador de promessas* (1959), a play that Anselmo Duarte (1920–2009) adapted for filming two years later.

<sup>5</sup> In 2010, Verzutti invited the following artists to develop sculptures for a *Bicho de sete cabeças* [seven headed monster]: Adriana Varejão (1964), Alexandre da Cunha (1969), Carlos Bevilacqua (1965) and Ernesto Neto (1964), Damián Ortega (1967), Efraim Almeida (1964), Jac Leirner and Nuno Ramos (1960). She also did collaborative work with Leda Catunda (1961), Tiago Carneiro da Cunha (1973) and Tonico Lemos Auad (1968) shown at the *Pet cemetery* exhibition.

<sup>6</sup> Verzutti's exhibition at Galpão Fortes Vilaça in 2008. Prior to this exhibition the artist showed “*Esculturas*” [Sculptures] at the same gallery in 2003, and *À sombra das raparigas em flor* [In the shade of the blossoming maidens], in 2006.

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(*Gato*, 2008) or on bases attached to the tombs (*Egito*, *São Francisco*, *Neo Rex* and *Burro*, all 2008), somewhat like funeral statues, or after Brancusi. In *Missionary*,<sup>7</sup> the eroticism in the physical proximity between two integral elements of a sculpture was heightened by the exhibition's name and by the appearance of genitals on most of the pieces (*Escala*, *Tamanha*, *Casada*, *Missionary* and *Beijo*, all 2011). However, although the connection of these groups observed these orders – i.e., thematic critique and the appearance of exercise – the resources, solutions, and substances varied in each case. The difference is that, from *Pet Cemetery* to *Missionary*, Verzutti's sculptures became more austere. Their finishing began to show sobriety when compared with the weld marks, paint drips, and spills of the previous period. Moreover, those decisions typical of work groups in public situations cause laughter; they show how a Verzutti exhibition presents itself with a dash of comedy. Somewhat an uninhibited moment, no doubt, except that imbued with an artificial, almost forced showing off. It just so happens that her sculptures unabashedly alight, unsettled and disarranged, in unnatural manner. Furthermore, they do not respond to previous determinations of context. Instead, they create their own circumstances. This also applies to the way her production asserts itself in the domain of “contemporary art”, averse to discourses that polarize “form and content”, “conceptual art and formalism”, “art and politics”, “autonomy and site specific.”

Here, rigorous thinking versus a permissive approach to producing the works points to an oeuvre of undisciplined imagination whose form is merely the settling down of its contents, whose intervention in the real is interrogative without any kind of prescriptive intent. Or, as in Verzutti's recent pieces (*Monkey box*, *Art book*, *Livro de criança*, 2013), an egg is placed in the square compartment of the box or tray of fitted pieces, a disjointed non-conforming element that from the onset denotes dissatisfaction. One of the features of contemporary culture is the possibility of arranging heterogeneous



FIG. IX  
 FISCHLI AND WESS  
 HUNGER, 1984

<sup>7</sup> Verzutti's exhibition at Galpão Fortes Vilaça in 2011.

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FIG. X  
 IVENS MACHADO  
 SEM TÍTULO, 1985

elements from different sources, in the absence of any commitments, to avoid strong markings, resulting in cynicism and frivolity, in agglutinations that lack grace and are not serious, but just prompt a shrug of the shoulders. Without bringing itself down, Verzutti's oeuvre interacts with antagonistic class positions and cultural "circles". To this end, it establishes a point of critical, acute and impudent observance that, by making a correlation between social structures and formal structures – or, if you like, between what is taken as exception and common sense, "good" taste and "bad" taste, cultured and rough – produces conflicting and inconstant conjoining of seduction and confrontation between the parties – hence the bodies in uneven and discontinuous disequilibrium. At bottom, these sculptures bind the differences that multiculturalism attempts to smooth over. They do not share the do-gooder leaning of contemporary art that aspires to redemptions; they do not simulate a "better" world, nor do they set out to report on *this* world (and denounce it, as so often seen around here). They are too boisterous in their "policy" of egalitarian intertwining and resistance to leveling. They are at the same time attractive and recalcitrant, not to say evil.

The warped character of Erika Verzutti's oeuvre – in which good humor and confidence in putting things right are fused with the insinuation of a melancholy unraveling – takes her close to other three-dimensional productions developed from the 1970s onwards. Suffice to think of aspects (unstable organization, scatology, sexual connotations, imprecise contour, leftovers etc.) found in the trajectories of the Austrian Franz West (1947–2012), the Swiss duo David Fischli (1952) and Peter Weiss (1946–2012), the U.S. artists Cy Twombly ([Fig IV] 1928–2011) and Mike Kelley (1954–2012) and among the Brazilian-born ones, Ivens Machado ([Fig. X], 1942), Saint Clair Cemin (1951), Sergio Romagnolo (1957) or Paulo Monteiro ([Fig. V], 1961), for example. Although these artists form a very heterogeneous group – even more so when lumped together in a passing mention – they do share a common approach to the real as a picture of mundane nonsense. Consequently, they are authors of works that act disjointedly because of discrepancies with form and material that do not coincide, with structures in partial dissolution, figurative or not, hollow or low, expressing an anti-authoritarian rebellion – deviating from dogmatic systems, pomp and bombast, making separate statements of appreciation of scholarship, especially in cultural conditions precipitated by modernity. Furthermore, it is important to derive, from this observation, the extent to which Verzutti's generation of Brazilian artists



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is relying on their country's increasingly systematic coexistence with the international art circuit, especially since the 1980s<sup>8</sup>. It is also important to observe how much this generation is favored by the "internal" cultural experience that has been evolving since the first half of the 20th century with an interest in framing Brazilian viewpoints for contemporary problems.

In this respect, Verzutti's pieces seem to interrogate – through tactile experience with formless and everyday objects – about their appearance and place in public space; about the reach and the social inclusion of art production, a phenomenon of imprecise contours. Yet, as it seems, this phenomenon is increasingly concentrated in economic activity, in the spectacular realm of entertainment, or in its reduction to means of social inclusion – perhaps to redeem it from the elitism of which it is usually accused. The fact is that the numbers currently mobilized by the art system, not only in monetary terms, but also in institutions and agents, including "the public", are growing and apparently bear no correspondence to the ability of artistic productions to intervene in public debate as a means of thinking, as a language, since, in this respect, art remains confined to a domain of specialists. Verzutti's sculptures do not thematize this in any form... However, they do perhaps internalize the magnitude of the issue when they cause visual impacts diametrically opposed to their own scale. After all, against the grain of retaining the size of hands, which invite intimate relationships, these works tend to cause immediate and lasting impression due to the iconic quality of figures and the multiple associations they trigger. These associations involve instances of life and indices of public and private spheres, different areas of knowledge, various levels, scales and classifications, never with a fixed outcome. There is always much to see in those traces of manipulation. Even when they rise to human stature, the handling of surfaces is patently obvious. Thus, Verzutti lends rhythm to volumes, speed to movements, eagerness to make and alter properties of her materials in decisions that clash with each other, and determine the alternation of crumpled, smooth, and protruding sections, bright or opaque, heavy or light, in vibrant or dull colors, in remarkable playfulness of concentration and propagation of energy. Finally a desire to disturb, think about and feel surroundings as materiality subject to combinatorial alterations until reaching a brute, awesome, fun and exciting visuality. One that is difficult to master, as a seven-headed monster would be

<sup>8</sup> The internationalization of art made in Brazil is usually measured by the circulation in foreign countries of works by Brazilian artists, or vice versa by the circulation of works of foreign artists in this country. However, it is worth mentioning here another phenomenon symptomatic of this process, which is that Brazilian artists enrolled on university courses abroad in the 1990s. Erika Verzutti, for example, was on a graduate program at Goldsmiths College in London, where she earned the title of Associate Research Student in Fine Arts in 2000, and where she studied Tonico Lemos Aua and Tiago Carneiro da Cunha in the same period. Among others, Rivane Neuenschwander (1967) and Alexandre da Cunha studied at Royal College in London; Mauro Restiffe (1970) at the International Center of Photography in New York; Deborah Bolsoni (1975) at Saint Martin's School of Art in London.