

FORM AND FEELING

THE MAKING OF CONCRETISM IN BRAZIL

Antonio Sergio Bessa, Editor

BRONX MUSEUM



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FORM AND SENSIBILITY

Discursive Discrepancies in Concrete and Neoconcrete Art

Michael Asbury

The advent of the neoconstructivist avant-gardes in Brazil during the mid-twentieth century has become consolidated as a local art historical canon. As always, canonization takes place at the expense of the complexities and even contradictions of those movements and artists it celebrates. The denomination “local canon” may itself be misleading, for in this particular case it has been to a large extent legitimized internationally through the projection, reception, and collection of Brazilian art abroad. More problematic still is the association between locale and a particular form of discourse, one that is seen to belong to the character and “temper” of a particular place. Nowhere is this more explicitly affirmed than in the so-called rift between *paulistas* (São Paulo natives) and *cariocas* (Rio de Janeiro natives), through art critical discourse pertaining to the concrete and neoconcrete movements. The association between place and “artistic temper,” particularly when viewed from the “outside,” becomes therefore all the more problematic. Writing from such a position and, precisely because of this, aware of the dangers of essentializing such production, I explore in this essay some of the inconsistencies within the respective discourses in order to open new avenues for debate and (art) historical understanding. This is therefore not a grand historical survey but a brief investigation into certain discrepancies that were already present within contemporaneous critical discourse, intent to escape the somewhat reductive light to which such movements have become exposed.

Reviewing the early São Paulo Biennials for a special edition of the *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper in 2001, the concrete poet Décio Pignatari recalled the controversy behind the national painting award at the occasion of its second edition in 1953. Known as the Guernica Biennial, it surveyed the pioneering efforts of European modernism, yet Pignatari's focus was on the Brazilian participation. His emphasis related to the consolidation of concrete art in Brazil, a movement that he himself, together with poets Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, had become closely allied to over the course of the 1950s. Pignatari's choice to remember how Alfredo Volpi came to share the national painting prize with Emiliano Di Cavalcanti may not seem at first the most obvious subject for review by a concrete poet, yet precisely because of this it is all the more revealing of the complex interconnections across critical discourses in mid-twentieth-century Brazilian modern art.

It was in fact only natural that Pignatari would wish to undermine a painter such as Di Cavalcanti, whose paintings had sought to represent the "Brazilian people," their customs and habits, in short, their character. A central figure in the figuration versus abstraction debate, Di Cavalcanti had protested the wave of abstraction that, in his opinion, had been uncritically imported and presented at the first São Paulo Biennial in 1951. It may seem reasonable to assume that it was not so much the manner in which Di Cavalcanti's subjects were represented but representation itself that bothered Pignatari. Yet at that moment, Volpi could hardly be called an abstractionist himself. On the contrary, a self-taught painter of modest background, his compositions of vernacular façades, festive flags, and buntings also celebrated popular Brazilian scenes and were often wrongly interpreted as naïf. In his review, Pignatari sought to repel the latter as a misguided conception:

At the 2nd Biennial, . . . the Jury was composed of a mixture of Brazilians and foreigners. These, at the first edition, concerned themselves with the international prizes, taking little notice of the national representation: the Brazilians were left to share their cake as their taste demanded. Being as such the great prize had already been promised to Di Cavalcanti.

Yet the Brazilian group had not counted with the ethical integrity of Herbert Read, that great name of art criticism and literature from England (also a poet), who is said to have argued: "If there is someone here who should receive a prize it is Alfredo Volpi." Utter national shock. Read was ready to go to the press to denounce the plot. In the end, the prize was conceded to both, with Read insisting that Volpi's name appeared first. It was from that point that the São Paulo concrete art group (to which I belonged), under the leadership of Waldemar Cordeiro, became enamored with admiration for Volpi, who I audaciously and polemically considered and still consider, as the "first and last great Brazilian painter" who the ignorant, in the American fashion, call the "painter of buntings."¹

His reference to "the American fashion" might in fact have been a rhetorical means of disassociating himself from the binary logic, articulated by the *Modernistas* in their critique of the first Biennial, one that associated abstraction with North

American cultural imperialism and representation with national identity and thus cultural liberation. One could add that Volpi would himself disrupt other quite distinct dichotomies, as will be discussed below.

Over the course of the 1950s, the concrete art group's adulation of Volpi's work would contradict some of their own fiercely held premises. Such a contradiction is somewhat camouflaged by the fact that Volpi, perhaps in response to the attention he received, began to elaborate complex geometric compositions and motifs that at first sight appeared increasingly concrete in nature. It is worth remembering that the term concrete art had been created by Theo van Doesburg in 1930 as a way of distinguishing a particular form of abstraction that drew directly from geometry to create "concrete" forms, rather than abstracting from the observable world. In this respect, Volpi's geometric compositions never fully escaped the condition of being abstractions from nature, given their undeniable relation to his former paintings of buntings, facades, and rooftops, in short, to those themes he never entirely abandoned and indeed would always return to.

Pignatari's statement is thus somewhat discordant from the orthodox art historical view that stresses the dichotomy between the mathematical basis ruling concrete creation that the consensus sees as characteristic of the São Paulo-based concrete art Ruptura Group (active from 1952) and that is juxtaposed with the intuitive approach pursued by the Rio de Janeiro-based neoconcrete artists. The latter had emerged toward the end of the 1950s out of the loose gathering of artists formally associated with the Grupo Frente (established in 1954). Discrepancies such as this, whether stemming from the discourse relating to São Paulo concrete art or the Rio de Janeiro neoconcrete movement (officially established in 1959), are the subject of this essay. It focuses on the figures of painter Alfredo Volpi in São Paulo and sculptor Franz Weissmann in Rio de Janeiro, drawing on the respective critical discourses that evolved around each of them.

THEORETICAL CONVERGENCE

There is a marked interest in Volpi's work expressed by Mário Pedrosa following the 1953 São Paulo Biennial painting awards, most notably in his organization of a retrospective exhibition on the artist in 1957 when the art critic described Volpi as the Brazilian master of his time.² Later, Pedrosa would organize a special gallery dedicated to Volpi at the 6th São Paulo Biennial in 1961 for which, as director of the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo, he acted as curator as was then customary practice. Yet, it would be a little too simplistic to attribute Pedrosa's interest in Volpi as stemming purely from recognition and respect for the British critic

Herbert Read. Indeed, it is possible to identify certain common traits and interests from the writing of both art critics.

It seems quite clear that Volpi represented for Pedrosa a critical link between contemporaneous art in Brazil, the theoretical paradigm he had been developing since his studies on Gestalt psychology—exposed in his 1949 thesis, “The Affective Nature of Form in the Work of Art”—and his political views on the nature and the possibilities of art within modern societies. Within such a broad spectrum of interests, Pedrosa attempted to articulate the notion of the autonomy of art, or a scientific approach as he saw it, in the context of constructivist-orientated abstraction. He understood this position in opposition to the excessive subjectivity defended at the time by figures such as André Breton.

Projecting itself as universal, Pedrosa’s intellectual and aesthetic outlook had the added requirement of combating the legacy reminiscent of socialist realism that is present within the figurative modernist tradition in Brazil, a legacy that had informed Di Cavalcanti’s attacks on abstraction during the Biennial in 1951.³ Being himself a Trotskyist militant, it was important for Pedrosa to separate left-wing politics from figurative art through a critical perspective that evaded the simplistic binary formulation that had been conjured within the context of Cold War politics. For Pedrosa, evidence for such a perspective would arise from quite unexpected quarters.

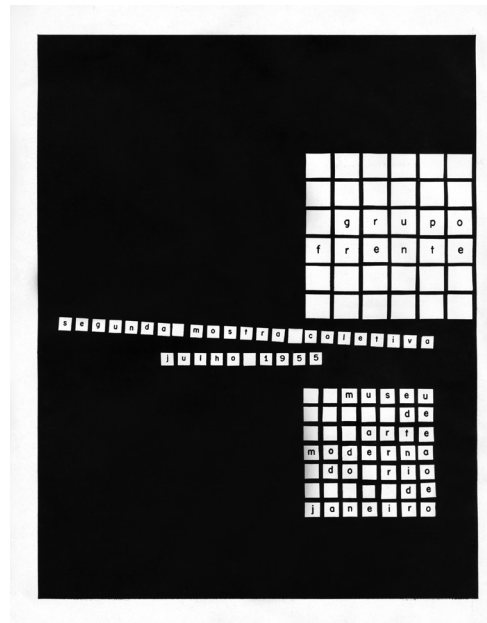
Invited by Almir Mavignier, Pedrosa had come into contact with extraordinary examples of so-called outsider art. The art critic would articulate such work in relation to notions of symbolic form and the universalist potential of abstraction.

Employed in the late 1940s at the National Psychiatric Hospital in the Engenho de Dentro neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro, Mavignier, together with Dr. Nise da Silveira, established art therapy workshops for the patients as an alternative to medication and electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). Having witnessed the extraordinary work produced by inmates, Mavignier invited artists Ivan Serpa and Abraham Palatnik as well as art critic Mário Pedrosa to contribute to those workshops. Later, other artists such as Lygia Pape and exhibition organizers such as Leon Degand, the then director of São Paulo’s Museum of Modern Art, would also attend. Yet for the four initial contributors (Mavignier, Serpa, Palatnik, and Pedrosa) the experience with the patients would be particularly significant.

Mavignier, Palatnik, and Serpa also participated in that first edition of the São Paulo Biennial in 1951, with the latter being awarded the young painter’s prize. Palatnik, who became so impressed by the work of the patients, had by then abandoned painting all together and submitted, with Pedrosa’s encouragement, his first Kinechromatic apparatus. The artwork left the Biennial’s awarding jury so perplexed that they could not categorize it under any of the running prizes (painting, sculpture, or prints) and so it remained *hors concours*.⁴

Perhaps the most visually striking proximity between concurrent avant-garde practice and the work of the psychiatric patients was the cover of the first Grupo Frente exhibition catalog in 1955. It is undoubtedly significant that in the years preceding that first Frente Group show a number of high-profile exhibitions by Engenho de Dentro interns took place. Perhaps not so coincidentally, given Ivan Serpa's leading role within Grupo Frente, the cover for its first exhibition catalog is somewhat reminiscent of Artur Amora's paintings, one of the Engenho de Dentro patients who approached painting through a process of simplification of patterns found in domino pieces.⁵

In 1949, through Mavignier's intervention, the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo hosted what turned out to be a somewhat controversial exhibition of work by Engenho de Dentro patients, selected by Leon Degand. For that occasion, Pedrosa wrote an article entitled "Arte: Necessidade Vital" (Art: Vital necessity) that refers to Dubuffet's notion of Art Brut (of 1945). It is not clear whether, other than by Pedrosa himself, such a term was known among the artists working at Engenho de Dentro. However, according to Glaucia Villas Boas, Pedrosa from the outset of his involvement with the psychiatric hospital possessed knowledge of Hans Prinzhorn, who he later cites in his 1951 essay "Forma e personalidade" (Form and personality).⁶ Prinzhorn published *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* in 1922 based on his work on diagnosed schizophrenics.⁷ Dubuffet's own collection and articulation of Art Brut is said to owe a great debt to Prinzhorn's study. In relation to the latter, the artist affirmed, for instance: "[The] innate necessity for expression could only be satisfied with the construction of forms [, giving his theory] a universal character . . . by the admission that the art of the insane could only be understood by the identification of pulsations towards the game, the ornamental, order, imitation and symbolization. [As such] there was no reason to discriminate the art of schizophrenics from the Fine Arts, except if considered by a dogmatic and outdated attitude."⁸ In 1947, reviewing an earlier exhibition of 245 works by Engenho de Dentro inmates at the Ministry of Education and Culture in Rio de Janeiro, Pedrosa had already argued that "no one would deny that such works are harmonious, seductive, dramatic, alive or beautiful, in short, true works of art."⁹ In



Catalog of Grupo Frente second exhibition, 1955. Collection of the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro.

1949 however, Pedrosa was forced to paraphrase Prinzhorn's argument in response to accusations by the academic artist and art journalist Quirino Campofiorito, who argued that such work could not be considered art but instead consisted of "simply a means to provide the unfortunate creature an escape from the mental torments that affect his normal equilibrium."¹⁰ Pedrosa's response to Campofiorito was blunt: "Worst of all is that there really is an analogy and similarity between one art and the other, as there is with that of children. This proves only that the reporter does not know what art is and takes nudes and the conventional statues of the academics as artistic expressions. . . . The artist is not that who has a diploma from the National School of Fine Arts, otherwise we would not have artists amongst the primitive peoples, including our native Indians."¹¹ Works from that 1949 exhibition were shown in 1950 at the Psychopathic Art exhibition in Paris during the 1st International Congress of Psychiatry. Moreover, in 1957 Carl Jung inaugurated an exhibition of paintings from Engenho de Dentro interns, archived within the then newly formed Museum of the Unconscious, during the 2nd International Congress of Psychiatry in Zurich.¹²

A sense of wonder and timelessness was expressed by Dr. Nise da Silveira upon her discovery of certain motifs found in the work of her patients which she promptly associated with Jungian archetypes. Beyond their common, if unconnected, correspondence with Carl Jung, Silveira shared with Herbert Read an intellectual allegiance with the political ideology of anarchism, which in the case of the art critic, informed his interpretation of the significance of such archetypal imagery.

We find in Read's writing similarities with Pedrosa's project for the affirmation of the universal qualities of such works, despite the fact that Pedrosa never ascribed to the Jungian archetypal repertoire.

In a similar experience to that of Silveira, Read, in what he described as "something of an apocalyptic experience," became "deeply moved . . . upon immediately recognizing [in the drawing of a five-year-old girl, the figure of a] 'mandala,' an ancient symbol of psychic unity, universally found in prehistoric and primitive art and in all principle cultures of history."¹³

According to art historian David Thistlewood, the discovery would make of Read "in all major respects, a follower of Jung" from the early 1940s onward.¹⁴ Moreover, for Thistlewood, the conversion would affect the way in which Read would identify the practice of modern art with psycho-political patterns of creative power:

A fixing upon abstract unities; a collation of personality traits specifically outside of the self; the celebration of maternity; an acknowledgment of belonging to the land—all these projections-beyond-self, Read thought, were fundamentally anarchistic. Moreover, objectified in creative works which he knew very well indeed—the mandala in Gabo's constructions; the Dark Shadow in his own novel *The Green Child*; maternal and terrestrial forms respectively in Moore's and Hepworth's sculpture—they helped substantiate Jung's demand for a reconciliation of individuals and the group.¹⁵

Perhaps it was precisely this combination of themes—the sense of belonging; the rhythmic patterns, and the maternity theme—which may have attracted Read to Volpi’s paintings at the Biennial in 1953. Another supposition would be that he identified in Volpi’s themes and style an approximation with the work of Alfred Wallis, a self-taught painter from St. Yves, whose work was discovered by Ben Nicholson in the late 1920s.¹⁶

For Pedrosa, on the one hand, it seems clear that Volpi would represent a synthesis of both frontlines in his aesthetic-ideological ethos. As Arantes has argued: “returning his attention to primitive art, [Pedrosa] mobilizes knowledge that allows him to relate those artistic forms with the ways of life of archaic civilizations. Similarly, comparing the child, the schizophrenic and the artist, he is obliged to pay attention to the issues related to the unconscious.”¹⁷ Arantes describes Pedrosa’s gradual incorporation of the psychoanalytical approach, arguing that although totally discarded in 1949 due to its purely subjective emphasis (and here Arantes adds: “which is incompatible with a concrete psychology”), by 1951, in his essay “Forma e personalidade” (Form and personality), the debate revolves around the emotional subtexts that could perhaps be behind aesthetic pleasure, even if the intent is to prove that such a phenomenon escapes both Freudian and Jungian psychoanalytical interpretations.¹⁸

According to Arantes, there is already a shift toward an interior model of reasoning which is made all the more evident by the text’s emphasis on “the primitive manifestation in art” which ultimately led Pedrosa to question the relation between symbolic values and formal structures. Moreover, Arantes argues that it is through his reading of Susanne Langer that Pedrosa (expressed in a paper given at the Fourth International Art Critics Association in Dublin 1953, the very year of Volpi’s prize) would finally loosen his position by recognizing that visual perception “is not merely a sensorial and mental process of the surface” but comes from the unconscious and crystallizes itself in consciousness after “a battle between several perceptive layers.”¹⁹ Read’s response to Langer, on the other hand, seems strikingly similar to



2nd São Paulo Biennial, 1953. Catalog cover design by Danilo Di Prete. Fundação Bienal de São Paulo / Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo.

descriptions of concrete art: “The whole of Langer’s work . . . considered the work of art as to be received as a vivid presentation of itself. It is not to be regarded as a stimulus to spurious feeling, but rather as the symbolic form of a specific, extended or heightened experience. Such finely articulated symbols might not be translated into other modes of expression; and the pretense to interpret them discursively is vain.”²⁰ Through Langer’s work—on Gestalt in “Presentational Forms” or “Life Symbols” and its references to primitive abstraction, or indeed through other studies such as the “Roots of Myth”—Read’s and Pedrosa’s views on the universalism of abstract form, as well as the symbolic transformation and sensibility in art in the broadest sense of the word, approach each other’s, at precisely the moment Volpi is awarded the National Painting Prize.²¹

To consider Volpi as somewhat of an “outsider” was therefore a necessary consequence of such a theoretical framework developed in parallel by the respective art critics. It was however one that did not fully respect the actual creative conditions of the artist himself. Tracing Volpi’s early trajectory, art critic Lorenzo Mammi stated how the artist was not as isolated as Pedrosa implied but that he had direct contact with events considered as historically significant within Brazilian modernism. Volpi attended for instance the 1917 controversial exhibition of expressionist paintings by Anita Malfatti as well as Fillipo Tommaso Marinetti’s 1926 public address in São Paulo. During the 1920s, as Mammi argues, Volpi had already suppressed in his painting the desire to merely reproduce nature but was already engaged with romanticist, impressionist, and later expressionist genres. Such work earned him the gold medal at the 1928 Salão de Belas Artes Muse Italiche, at the Palácio das Indústrias, São Paulo, for artists of Italian descent. Italian art from Giotto to that of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, together with a working class and lower middle-class network of Italian artists living in São Paulo constitute Volpi’s broad art apprenticeship.²²

The participation within the local salons continued with varying success and in the 1930s Volpi integrated the circle of the Santa Helena group: a studio formed by artists, many of whom were of Italian descent. Key protagonists of *modernismo* would occasionally participate in meetings organized by the group, figures such as Sérgio Millet, Bruno Giorgi, Lasar Segall, and Tarsila do Amaral. In 1938 Volpi had the opportunity to see the work of Josef Albers, an artist he claimed to have always admired. Several accounts also state how Volpi had absorbed the work of Cezanne at the occasion of the exhibition of French Art “From David to Picasso” held in 1940 in São Paulo. Volpi is also said to have been influenced by artists such as Oswaldo Goeldi, considered as a unique figure of expressionist sensibility within Brazilian art. Lasar Segall, the Lithuanian expressionist who became a central figure within the 1920s São Paulo modern art movement, also held a significant role in Volpi’s artistic formation.

2nd São Paulo Biennial,
1953. President Juscelino
Kubitschek, Francisco
Matarazzo Sobrinho, and
guests viewing Pablo
Picasso's *Guernica*. Fundação
Bielal de São Paulo / Arquivo
Histórico Wanda Svevo.



Such a brief summary of Volpi's artistic trajectory prior to his "discovery" by Herbert Read in 1953 suggests an artist with a solid foundation and awareness of early twentieth-century movements with significant connections within the local artistic milieu.

It is however one of Mammi's remarks that would place Volpi more in relation to the sophistication of a Ben Nicholson than the "outsider" character of a painter such as Alfred Wallis. In the late 1930s Volpi began frequenting the coastal town of Itanhaém where he came across the work of "naïf" painter Emygdio Emiliano de Souza. This encounter became one of the sources for his stylistic shift which can be noted in the paintings of house façades and later with the introduction of bunting motifs.²³

Although it is difficult to trace a precise line of development, given that the artist rarely dated his paintings, Volpi's work did not progress in a linear fashion. It also seems that several distinct themes and "styles" were worked on concurrently. What is certain is that such shifts in Volpi's technique and compositions—the switch in technique from oil on canvas to tempera or the adoption of naïf-like motifs, after his encounter with the works by Emiliano de Souza—were taken consciously, as opposed to being merely stylistic whims of an untrained, intuitive artist.

Equally, within the transition from the painter of popular festivities and façades to the celebrated concrete artist, the bunting in Volpi's work assumed an iconic role: a pivot through which the artist detached himself from figuration to become a producer of geometric, if not entirely, concrete forms.

Pedrosa's emphasis on Volpi's progression from the craftsmanship of his profession as a painter-decorator to that of the professional artist hints at a possible reason for the concrete group's interest in the artist from Cambuci—the working-class and lower middle-class São Paulo neighborhood where Volpi lived for most of his life.²⁴ Waldemar Cordeiro, spokesman for the Ruptura Group, himself an artist of Italian origin, drew on Gramscian Marxist theory to argue that the simplicity of the concrete geometric visual language held a direct appeal that transcended erudition and Volpi seems paradigmatic in this respect: "We believe with Gramsci that culture only exists historically when it creates a unity of thought between the 'simple [people]' and the artists and intellectuals. In effect, only within this symbiosis with the simple does art rid itself from the intellectual elements and from its subjective nature, and so becomes life."²⁵ However, if Volpi over the course of the 1950s transcended erudition, he did so, arguably, by contradicting the very premises of the concrete art movement. The figure of the bunting, the graphic mechanism through which Volpi's work integrates the concrete visual vocabulary, is at one and the same time the iconic abstracted symbol that denies that association.

It is true that Volpi did produce work that to all intents and purposes could be described as concrete art. Such is the case of *Composição Concreta Branca e*

2nd São Paulo Biennial, 1953.
Awarded artists on front
row: Maria Martins, Tereza
d'Amico, Antonio Bandeira,
Arnaldo Pedroso D'Horta,
Alfredo Volpi, Di Cavalcanti,
José Fábio Barbosa da Silva,
Bruno Giorgi, and Robert
Tatin. Fundação Bienal de
São Paulo / Arquivo Histórico
Wanda Svevo.



Vermelha (Concrete Composition in White and Red) of 1955, one of the rare works that is titled and dated, a work Pignatari described as follows: “The dynamic structure in his extraordinary checkered painting in white and red, where a refraction phenomenon takes place through the interference of the elements (that reconcile themselves at the center of the rectangular picture: the incidence of the eye), confers the same white two diverse qualities. This work is precisely a concretist work, even if for Volpi, probably it does not matter which ‘ism’ it belongs to.”²⁶ Other works by Volpi from the second half of the 1950s present clear constructivist-oriented compositions. Volpi’s participation in the First Exhibition of Concrete Art, held at the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo in 1956, which traveled to Rio de Janeiro the following year, attests the level of his integration within that group. His inclusion in that exhibition raises nevertheless some interesting issues with regard to the consensual narratives on the concrete and later neoconcrete movements in Brazil.

Pignatari’s description of Volpi’s *Composição Concreta Branca e Vermelha* is in this sense somewhat discordant with orthodox definitions of concrete art. By dismissing the process through which the artist achieved the composition, Pignatari inadvertently associates Volpi with what would become a central tenet within the neoconcrete discourse: one that called for the sole critical focus on the finished work rather than the process which led to it.²⁷

As discussed earlier, the mathematical basis ruling concrete art production is often placed in opposition to the intuitive approach pursued by the neoconcrete artists. The divergence between the two groups is said to have emerged precisely at the moment in which they were brought together at the occasion of the national concrete art exhibition.

Volpi’s role within such an exhibition was ambivalent and therefore all the more art historically significant. This fact did not escape the attention of Rodrigo Naves who argued that:

Perhaps most of Volpi’s oeuvre within the constructive art’s sphere of influence is closer to the aestheticism of concrete art. Several other works, however, feature solutions . . . which imply a deeper involvement with neoconcrete art.

. . .

According to his output during the second half of the 1950s, Volpi seemed to straddle the influence of both groups, and always because of his unique solutions.²⁸

For Naves the complexity of Volpi’s work, one that is evidenced through its ambivalence with respect to the constructivist movements in Brazil, reveals the very contradictions present within that optimistic moment of rapid industrialization of the nation. His stubborn artisan processes that combined sophisticated colorist skills in



2nd São Paulo Biennial, 1953.
Guided tour with Jayme
Maurício and Mario Pedrosa.
Fundação Bienal de São
Paulo / Arquivo Histórico
Wanda Svevo.

contrast with the most unpretentious themes and motifs, a personal incorporation of the modernist tradition, would have a profound impact on the generation of artists that followed—most notably, as Naves argued, among the neoconcrete artists.

Naves's supposition is confirmed by a letter Ferreira Gullar sent to Mário Pedrosa prior to the publication of the Neoconcrete Manifesto. The letter is dated February 1959 and in it, after discussing some business about the forthcoming AICA conference that would be held in Brazil later that year, Gullar states: "In short, we [the neoconcretes] seek to put things back in their places: let us do away with this scientific demagoguery that only frightens the bourgeois and confuses the artist himself. Art is not taught in school, and one need not be a doctor (rather, someone like Volpi) to make it."²⁹

DIVERGENCES BETWEEN SUSANNE LANGER AND FERREIRA GULLAR

According to consensual art historical accounts, neoconcretism's rejection of mathematics as a premise for creation was at the heart of its reaction to the concrete art group in São Paulo. Although this referred initially to poetry, specifically to Ferreira Gullar's abhorrence of the proposed "Plano piloto para poesia concreta" (Pilot plan for concrete poetry), it was later applied, but arguably never fully elaborated, within the overall neoconcrete critique.³⁰ It is true that one of the most significant contributions of neoconcretism was precisely the questioning of disciplinary distinctions within cultural production. We witness for instance the close relation between neoconcrete poems and works that required manipulation by the spectator, while Gullar's "Teoria do não-objeto" (Theory of the nonobject) brought the fields of painting and sculpture together through a phenomenological understanding of their presence in space, in the world.³¹ The neoconcrete manifesto, in this way, privileged the perception of the finished work as an object (a nonobject as would be argued later), a unique apparition within the world, over and above the process that led to its constitution: "It does not matter what mathematical equations are to be found at the root of a sculpture or painting by Vantongerloo. It is only when someone perceives and experiences the work of art, that its rhythms and colors have meaning. Whether or not Pevsner used figures of descriptive geometry as his starting point is without interest, if placed alongside the new space that his sculptures give birth to and the cosmic-organic expression which his works reveal."³² Mathematics thus stood as "diametrically" opposed to the organic, intuitive, and expressive act itself: qualities held dear by the neoconcretists and that the São Paulo concretists are said to have avoided at all costs. For Gullar, art that was constituted or perceived through mathematical premises submitted the object to "the machine-eye" rather than the "body-eye." Proposing

Members of the international jury gathered on December 12, 1953, to select the winners of the 2nd São Paulo Biennial. Participants included Herbert Read, James Johnson, Sweeney, Bernard Dorival, Emile Langui, Max Bill, Mario Pedrosa, Sandberg, Hofenstaegel, Palluchini, Brest, Pefeiffer, Sérgio Milliet, and Santa Rosa. Photograph Folhapress.



nothing less than a reevaluation of the legacy of modernism itself, the manifesto therefore laid out a revisionist critique of works by European pioneers of modern art:

Neoconcrete art asserts the absolute integration of these elements and believes that the 'geometric' vocabulary it utilizes can render the expression of complex human realities as proved by a number of artworks created by Mondrian, Malevich, Pevsner, Gabo, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, etc. Even if these artists themselves mistook the concept of expressive form for the notion of mechanical form, it must be clear that, in art language, the so-called geometric forms totally lose the objective character of geometry to turn into vehicles for the imagination.³³

This revisionist approach to historic works becomes the method for analysis for the production of the neoconcrete group itself, and Franz Weissmann is perhaps the most obvious example of such a posteriori theoretical procedure.

The very idea of the "organic," heralded by Gullar through the image of the object as "quasi-corpus" as a principle relation to geometry within neoconcrete works, could be seen to have been explored, keeping in mind the specificity of each case, by Herbert Read in his writing on Henry Moore. Such a coincident use of terminology seems pertinent if only because Moore had been one of Weissmann's early references within his sculptural work over the course of the 1940s. Read in 1952 drew on D'Arcy Thompson's *On Growth and Form* as an example of how mathematics can describe form in nature stating that in "the organic type of art . . . [it is] really a choice between applying the values of a particular formula or varying the values of a general formula. It is only necessary to add that the artist, even if he is a constructivist, proceeds by intuitive rather than calculative methods."³⁴ It is clear that the notion of the organic invoked for Read, in this particular instance, the idea of a process of abstracting from nature. Read's analysis of Pevsner and Gabo is quite distinct, however, which leads to the conclusion that he, like Pedrosa had done concurrently, was in fact attempting to establish some sort of scientific analogy for the understanding of art in general.

The particular vision of reality common to the constructivism of Pevsner and Gabo is derived, not from superficial aspects of a mechanized civilization, nor from a reduction of visual data to their "cubic planes" or "plastic volumes" . . . but from an insight into the structural processes of the physical universe as revealed by modern science. The best preparation for a true appreciation of constructive art is a study of Whitehead or Schrödinger. But it must again be emphasized that though the intellectual vision of the artist is derived from modern physics, the creative construction which the artist then presents to the world is not scientific, but poetic. It is the poetry of space, the poetry of time, of universal harmony, of physical unity. Art—it is its main function—accepts this universal manifold which science investigates and revels, but reduces it to the concreteness of a plastic symbol.³⁵

Read's articulation of the relation between art and science within constructivist art approaches the premises of neoconcretism not so much through what is said but

by reference to Alfred North Whitehead and the notion of “the concreteness of the plastic symbol,” which I would suggest, although not exactly analogous, approaches Gullar’s idea of the art object as a “quasi-corpus.”

Gullar cited the philosopher Susanne Langer in his elaboration of the theoretical premises of neoconcretism, yet in order to do so while simultaneously maintaining a critical distinction from concrete art, he was obliged to ignore key aspects of Langer’s thinking. While concentrating primarily on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, Gullar, in other words, ignored the principle conclusions Langer drew from her PhD mentor, Alfred North Whitehead, namely what she defined as “symbolic transformation” within nondiscursive forms of creation. Langer saw mathematics as an island of abstract thought in the sea of positivistic empiricism, which she described as dominating mid-twentieth-century thinking: “And so, a scientific culture succeeded to the exhausted philosophical vision. An undisputed and uncritical empiricism—not skeptical, but positivistic—became its official metaphysical creed, experiment its avowed method, a vast hoard of ‘data’ its capital, and correct prediction of future occurrences its proof.”³⁶ Langer argued in 1942 that a philosophy of reason that connects Descartes to German idealism had come to an end brought by a particular form of positivistic empiricism that held a “naïve faith in sense-evidence.”

This submission of subjectivity within empiricism, through the scientific equation of truth with fact, was exemplified by Langer in the efforts produced to align psychology with scientific methods, and although not explicit within the text itself, we could extrapolate this to include the Marxist rejection of idealism through historical materialism. Published in the United States during World War II, Langer’s critique of the faith in the objectivity of the scientific method, as the notion of *Weltanschauung* (worldview) itself, transcended national and political divisions.

As such, can we not think of Langer’s critique in relation to the ideology of developmentalism which swept through Brazil during the post-World War II era? Is it not the case that such a scientific, technocratic culture, empirical yet arguably positivistic (as in the understanding of Langer) in its approach, serves rather well as a broad definition for the ideology of rapid industrialization during the Juscelino Kubitschek government?

Is it a coincidence that neoconcretism claimed its “independence of artistic creation in the face of objective knowledge (science) and practical knowledge (ethic, politics, industry, etc.)”?³⁷ Perhaps, since (if considered under Langer’s perspective) this statement would suggest that at the crux of neoconcretism’s autonomy—its a-political laboratory-like approach to cultural production, as Ronaldo Brito has suggested—was the negation of a productive (positivistic) relation with society at large. Was this negation not the very source of its innate political and aesthetic tensions that would ultimately lead to its dissolution during the 1960s?³⁸ If seen

through Langer's notion of symbolic transformation, we do not find rupture (other than Gullar's own defection from avant-garde practice in 1961 to become a Marxist playwright) but continuity and autonomy or even detachment in an existential sense.³⁹

The tension within neoconcretism outlined by Ronaldo Brito can perhaps be traced to Gullar's own reluctance to accept a reciprocal relationship between author and reader. Underlying the development of the poem-object lies Gullar's frustration that a poem had not been read as the author had intended.⁴⁰ It required thus a mechanism to secure its "poetic" objectivity, that is, the disposition of the poem over several pages so that its content could not be immediately disclosed but revealed gradually according to the author's intention. Symbolic transformation here is discursive (in which the word *Verde* becomes, through repetition, *Erva*) rather than open and subjective, particularly when compared to experiments carried out by contemporaneous poets such as Wladimir Dias-Pino whose poem "Solida" (1956) invited the readers themselves to determine the order of the word-signs.

Objectivity, claimed in the name of mathematics, was also not so straight forward in the case of the presence of formulations within concrete art. If Langer saw science as having been submitted to "practical knowledge" through a positivistic agenda dictated by the ideology of technology and industrialization, mathematics remained for her an exception within her philosophical enquiry into "symbolic transformation": "A mathematician does not profess to say anything about the existence, reality, or efficiency of *things* at all. His concern is the possibility of *symbolizing things*, and of symbolizing the relations into which they might enter with each other. His 'entities' are not data but *concepts*."⁴¹ Langer is referring to a level of complexity within the mathematical field that transcended simple descriptive geometry. However, given the metaphysical investment that Langer places on mathematics as a nonpositivistic domain of symbolic formation, Mário Pedrosa's essay entitled "The Problematics of Sensibility" (which draws on Langer's "Feeling and Form") is perhaps a better means of understanding the position held by Weissmann's organization of intuition through geometrical and later nongeometrical abstract forms.⁴² As we shall see, mathematics in itself is still not sufficient as a means of unravelling the nondiscursive, in short, semantically complex character of the work, if perceived as process rather than finished object.

Weissmann's relation to neoconcretism can only be understood as retrospective since during the short lifespan of the movement itself (1959–1961) the sculptor was in the midst of experimenting with nongeometric production. The fact that he traveled to Europe almost immediately after the official launch of the Neoconcrete Manifesto is conveniently ignored, possibly because during that period he would turn to the *Informe!*—that dreaded, hot bloodied, adversary of the neoconcrete geometric yet intuitive expression. Weissmann is therefore a paradoxical

figure, which makes him all the more interesting, being neoconcrete before neoconcretism and *Informel* during much of the existence of neoconcretism itself.

If we admit that Weissmann's neoconcrete work was produced before the advent of the movement itself, then his relation to concrete art is also problematized. We find clues to this through an analysis of what is usually considered his "first" abstract geometric work, the *Cubo vazado* (Hollowed cube).

Weissmann's own accounts of whether or not he had been aware of Max Bill or Bill's *Tripartite Unity* at the moment of conception of *Cubo vazado* (1951) are contradictory as can be noted in the following statements:

The *Cubo vazado* was the definite severance with the figure. During this period, I liked Max Bill's work a lot. He stimulated me and from this stimulus *Cubo vazado* was born. I start off with the cube as a three-dimensional element and the square as a flat element. The cube was the original element which gave me the impulse to move on.⁴³

And:

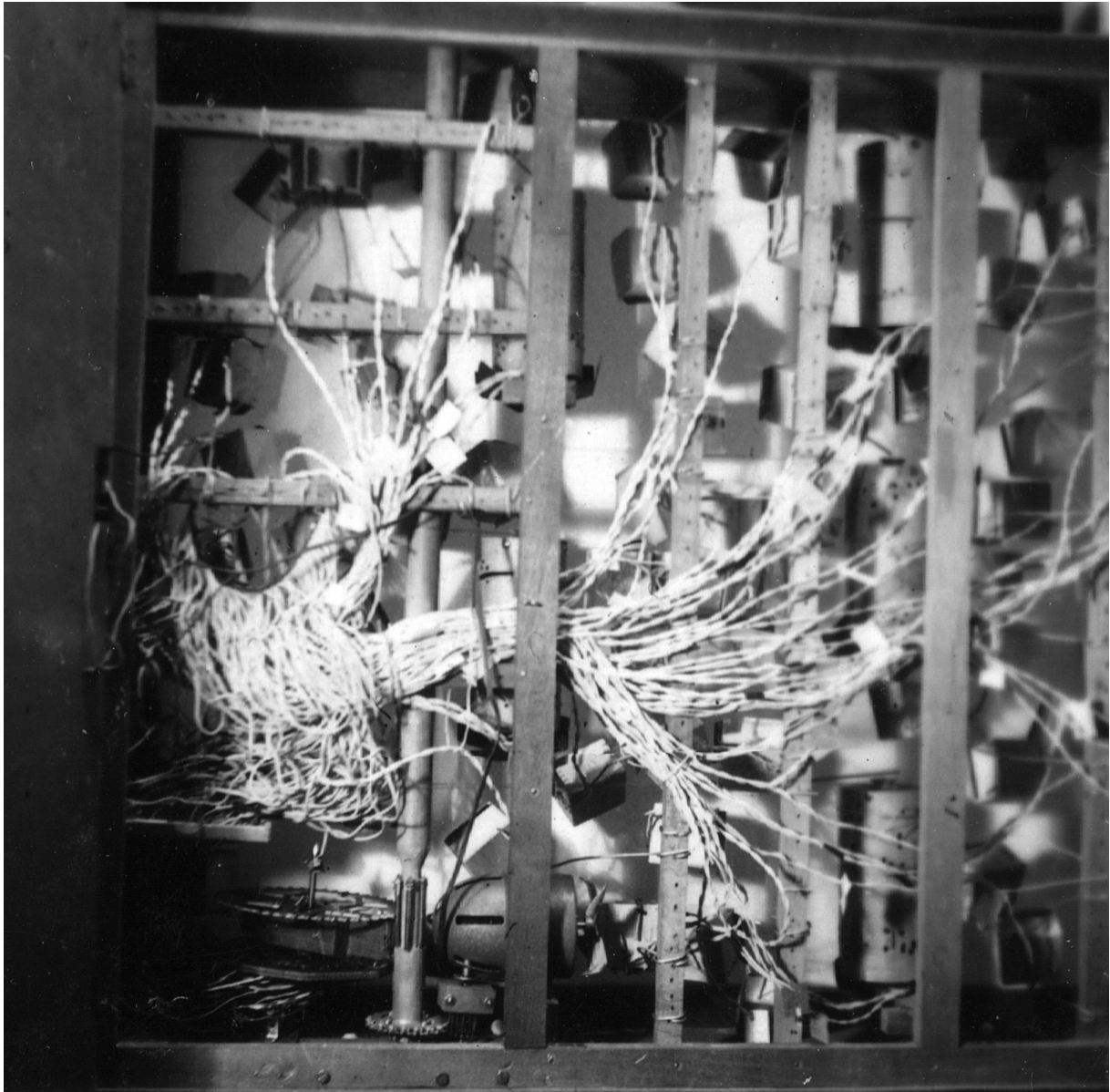
At that time, I didn't know who Max Bill was. I didn't know his work. . . . How did the perforated cube [*cubo vazado*] come about? Perhaps due to a need to break with everything. That madness. So, I wanted to invent the simplest geometric form. I thought the simplest geometric form was the cube. Then I saw Max Bill's work.⁴⁴

Whatever the case, today one can affirm that *Cubo vazado* was a pivotal work in Weissmann's career as it relates to key concepts and works within the concrete art movement in Brazil during the course of the 1950s while possessing (quite literally) at its core what would become the artist's own procedural logic within the construction of geometric-based sculpture: namely, the configuration of space via the articulation of lines and planes.

Among the busts, torsos, and feminine figures present in photographs of Weissmann's studio in Belo Horizonte in the 1940s are a plethora of constructions in wire, metal plate, and string which clearly indicate the pressing necessity Weissmann felt for a renewal in his formal research.

Among the early works in wire we find a work in the form of what he would later call a "linear cube." It is barely visible because of the fact that its void is denied by a series of threads in the style of Pevsner or Gabo, that crisscross the three planes established by the parallel lines within the six-sided structure. The *Cubo vazado* formed by a line, rather than a more volumetric square cross-sectioned strip, was therefore already present as a prototype circa 1948, and if linear virtual volumetric construction was already present within the work, albeit in the form of studies following Gabo and Pevsner, perhaps it also answers the ambivalent relation that *Cubo vazado* has with the legacy of Max Bill. That is to say that an affinity was

Abraham Palatnik,
*Kinechromatic Device: First
Movement in Blue and
Purple*, 1951. Rear view of
the work depicting electric
mechanism. Courtesy of The
Estate of Abraham Palatnik.



Abraham Palatnik,
*Kinechromatic Device: First
Movement in Blue and Purple*,
1951. Artist working on
electric mechanism. Courtesy
of The Estate of Abraham
Palatnik.



obviously recognized but not through directly referring to Bill but instead to the very sources of European constructivism itself.

If Weissmann's work with the line was achieved through a process of abstracting, a moment of rupture must have occurred in which the point of departure was no longer the figure but geometry itself. In this sense the line in Weissmann's work still holds a significant relation to concrete art.

The wire sculptures, in their invocation of geometric figures, suggest that it is still possible to conceive the form a priori even if maquettes were used as an initial means of intuitive experimentation, while the complexity of the geometric progressions created from planes suggest that the form could only be achieved by experimentation, as the artist himself admitted on several occasions. The former would suggest the proceedings of a concrete artist, the latter the intuitive approach of a neoconcrete artist. Yet, both these procedures occur concurrently with Weissmann. The works in wire, in suggesting volumetric form by providing certain but not all of the form's outlines, can be considered to function within the domain of Gestalt psychology, which shows how cognitive processes operate in order to "complete" a suggested pattern. With the works from planes no such clarity is provided. In these the form remains mysterious, even when its composition, after some consideration, is deduced. When this ambivalence is combined with Weissmann's transition to creative procedures closer to the *informel* tendency around 1960, it becomes evident that his work and intuitive approach to art making had more in common with Pedrosa's broad advocacy of abstraction than any position that the concrete/neoconcrete dichotomy would allow. As Pedrosa, drawing on Langer's *Feeling and Form*, argued:

However much the habit of extrinsic rationalism wants to make us believe that a gesture, an action, a thought resulting from pure neutral cerebral effort attached to the rules of deductive thinking to biological fatality, the primary sensory reaction, the spontaneous organizing force of the perceptive apparatus, the awakening of sensitive memory, the interaction, after all, of the entire psychic complex placed in movement do not permit this absolute separation between logical discursive process in search of an abstract and transferable conclusion and the subjective-emotive complex which is the ego. Not only the artist but also the philosopher, the scientist, the politician are beings motivated by sensibility. As with all products of mental activity, the work of art participates in the symbolic nature of human thinking. Only its symbolic essence is very different from that of the discursive verbal symbol.⁴⁵

Notes

This essay brings together certain themes that I have been working on during and since the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded my “Meeting Margins: Transnational Art in Latin America and Europe 1950–78” research project that was run jointly by the Art History Department at the University of Essex and the TrAIn research center at the University of Arts, London. A presentation at our final conference in 2011, at Tate Modern in London, drew on many issues that I explore here and which themselves were based on several papers published over the course of the project. Of particular relevance here: Michael Asbury, “Franz Weissmann: Mitos Vazios,” in *Franz Weissmann: A síntese e a lírica construtiva* (Rio de Janeiro: Centro de Arte Hélio Oiticica, 2012), 22–27. I have since published an essay on Volpi that draws on sections of this essay; see Michael Asbury, “Alfredo Volpi: At the Crossroads of Brazilian Modern Art,” in *Volpi: At the Crossroads of Brazilian Modern Art*, ed. M. Asbury and C. Brunson (London: Cecilia Brunson Projects, 2016), 7–15 (English) and 61–69 (Portuguese).

1 / Décio Pignatari, “Desvio para o concreto,” *Folha de São Paulo, Caderno Especial 2*, May 20, 2001. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

2 / See Mário Pedrosa, “Volpi, 1924–1957” (Rio de Janeiro: Museu de Arte Moderna, 1957), exhibition

catalog, translated into English by Steve Berg in Glória Ferreira and Paulo Herkenhoff, eds., *Mário Pedrosa: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2015), 281–285.

3 / See Michael Asbury, “The Bienal de São Paulo: Between Nationalism and Internationalism,” in *Espaço Aberto/Espaço Fechado: Sites for Sculpture in Modern Brazil*, ed. P. Curtis and G. Feeke (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 2006), 72–83, exhibition catalog.

4 / See Michael Asbury, “Some Notes on Abraham Palatnik’s Kinechromatic Apparatus,” in *Abraham Palatnik: A reinvenção da pintura* (Brasília: Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, 2013), 61–77.

5 / Mavignier upon seeing the contemporary work of artist José Patricio at the 2008 ARCO art fair, again recalled Artur Amora. See Michael Asbury, “José Patricio: Painting by Numbers/Pinturas Numerosas” (São Paulo: Galeria Nara Roesler, 2008), 1–10, exhibition catalog.

6 / Later published in M. Pedrosa, *Arte, forma e personalidade* (São Paulo: Kairós, 1979), 83–118.

7 / G. Villas Boas, “A estética da conversão: O atelier do Engenho de Dentro e a arte concreta carioca,” *Tempo Social, Revista de Sociologia da USP* 20, no. 2 (2008): 210. Hans, Prinzhorn, *Bildneri der Geisteskranken* (Berlin: Springer, 1922), translated by Eric von Brockdorff as *Artistry of*

the Mentally Ill (New York: Springer Verlag, 1972).

8 / Villas Boas, 210.

9 / Mário Pedrosa, “Ainda a Exposição do Centro Psiquiátrico” [Still the exhibition at the psychiatric center], *Correio da Manhã*, February 2, 1947.

10 / Villas Boas, “A estética da conversão,” 206.

11 / Villas Boas, 207.

12 / For an insightful study of the relations between the psychiatric hospitals in Brazil and the art historical reception of Brazilian art of the mid-twentieth century, see Kaira M. Cabañas, *Leaning from Madness: Brazilian Modernism and Global Contemporary Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018). For a detailed biographical trajectory of Nise da Silveira, see Luiz Carlos Mello, *Nise da Silveira: Caminhos de uma psiquiatra rebelde*, 2nd ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Automática, 2015).

13 / D. Herbert Read Thistlewood, *Formlessness and Form: An Introduction to His Aesthetics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 112.

14 / Herbert Read’s *Education Through Art* had been published in 1943.

15 / Thistlewood, 115.

16 / For a discussion on the themes and issues surrounding Volpi and the 1953 Biennial prize, see Michael Asbury, “Alfredo Volpi: At the Crossroads of

Brazilian Modern Art,” in *Volpi: At the Crossroads of Brazilian Modern Art*, ed. M. Asbury and C. Brunson (London: Cecilia Brunson Projects, 2016), 7–15 (English) and 61–69 (Portuguese).

17 / Otilia B. F. Arantes, *Mário Pedrosa: Itinerário crítico* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2004), 98.

18 / Arantes, 98.

19 / Arantes, 99.

20 / Quoted in Thistlewood, *Formlessness and Form*, 152.

21 / See Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951 [1942]). At the Meeting Margins conference held at the university of Essex in December 2010, Suzana Vaz elaborated on the significance of Jung within the work at the Engenho de Dentro Hospital, and Sérgio Martins investigated the articulation of Gestalt psychology and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology within the historiography of neoconcretism. A report of that conference was published as a special dossier in Michael Asbury, “The Popularization of Scientific Thought,” in Dossier Meeting Margins, *Concinnitas Journal*, Instituto de Artes, Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro (2011), 14–23.

22 / See L. Mammi, *Volpi* (São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 1999). See also M. Asbury, “Alfredo Volpi,” in Asbury and Brunson, *Volpi*, 7–15 (English) and 61–69 (Portuguese).

23 / Mammi, *Volpi*, 105.

24 / Pedrosa, “Volpi, 1924–1957.”

25 / W. Cordeiro, “O Objeto,” in *Revista Arquitetura e Decoração*, no. 20 (December 1956); reprinted in Aracy A. Amaral, *Projeto Construtivo Brasileiro na Arte (1950–1962)* (Rio de Janeiro: Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro, 1977), 75, exhibition catalog.

26 / D. Pignatari, “A Exposição de Arte Concreta e Volpi,” Suplemento Dominical, *Jornal do Brasil*, January 19, 1957. Reprinted in Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari, and Haroldo de Campos, eds., *Teoria da poesia concreta: Textos críticos e manifestos 1950–1960* (São Paulo: Livraria Duas Cidades, 1975), 60.

27 / Pignatari, 60.

28 / R. Naves, “A complexidade de Volpi,” *Novos Estudos* 4 (July 2008): 150.

29 / Ferreira Gullar, letter to Mário Pedrosa, February 16, 1959. Reprinted in Ferreira and Herkenhoff, *Mário Pedrosa*, 417.

30 / According to Gullar, the spokesman for the neoconcrete group, the initial disagreement emerged from a proposal from the brothers Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari, wishing to publish a plan outlining the next ten years of concrete poetry along mathematical principles of composition. See statement by Gullar in *Neoconcretos*,

documentary film, directed by Katia Maciel, produced by N-IMAGEM (UFRJ, 2001).

31 / Ferreira Gullar “Teoria do Não Objeto,” Suplemento Dominical, *Jornal do Brasil*, December 19, 1959. For the translated facsimile, see *Neoconcrete Experience*, Gallery 32 (blog), 2009, <http://gallery-32.blogspot.com/2010/02/neoconcrete-experience-11-dec-2009-30.html>.

32 / “Manifesto neoconcreto,” Suplemento Dominical, *Jornal do Brasil*, March 22, 1959. Facsimile translated at <http://gallery-32.blogspot.com/2010/02/neoconcrete-experience-11-dec-2009-30.html>. Note that although the manifesto is signed by members of the Neoconcrete Group, including Weissmann himself, it is common knowledge that its author was Ferreira Gullar.

33 / “Manifesto neoconcreto.”

34 / Herbert Read, *The Philosophy of Modern Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969 [1952]), 201.

35 / Read, 233.

36 / Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951). For a greater insight into what Langer possibly imagined to be the transcendental potential of mathematics, refer to Bertrand Russell, *An Essay on the Foundations of Geometry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1892).

37 / “Manifesto neoconcreto.”

38 / Or, as Ronaldo Brito has argued, its condition of representing the apex and rupture of the constructivist tendency in Brazil. See Ronaldo Brito, *Neoconcretismo: Vértice e ruptura do projeto construtivo brasileiro* (São Paulo: Edições Cosac & Naify 1999.)

39 / Lygia Clark is perhaps the most obvious example within this proposition of neoconcrete symbolic transformation, but Oiticica’s transition from the 1950s to the 1960s could also be understood within the context of continuous “metaphysical” enquiry through the artist’s reading of Bergson. See Michael Asbury, “O Hélio não Tinha Ginga,” in *Hélio Oiticica: Fios soltos do experimental*, ed. Paula Braga (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2007): 27–51.

40 / Gullar statement in *Neoconcretos*.

41 / Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 19.

42 / Mário Pedrosa, “Problemática da sensibilidade,” Suplemento Dominical, *Jornal do Brasil*, July 11, 1959. Facsimile translated at <http://gallery-32.blogspot.com/2010/02/neoconcrete-experience-11-dec-2009-30.html>.

43 / Artist statement made in 2002, *Franz Weissmann: 1911–2005* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições Pinakotheke, 2011), 217, exhibition catalog.

44 / Weissman, interview by Paulo Sergio Duarte, Paulo

Venancio Filho, and Vanda Klabin, *Gávea, Revista de História da Arte e Arquitetura*, 14, no. 14 (September 1996). Reprinted in *Franz Weissmann* (São Paulo: Instituto Tomie Ohtake, 2008), 199, exhibition catalog.

45 / Pedrosa, “Problemática da sensibilidade.”