

Neo-concretism, Apex and Rupture of the Brazilian Constructive Project

RONALDO BRITO

Introduction to the first edition [1985]

This analysis, written by a young and inexperienced critic a little less than a decade ago, could not undergo revision without becoming another text altogether, or an internal argument with itself. Therefore, it is set forth exactly as it was produced, with all of its innocence, flaws, and errors. The extracts published elsewhere may have conferred upon it a certain objectivity, thereby releasing the author from new and successive re-elaborations. However, the imperative would be to continue specifying and deepening the analysis of the works themselves, thus avoiding the rigid limitations of the actual Neo-concrete movement. Since 1975, this movement has become increasingly well known (or at least increasingly cited), acknowledged, and appreciated. Leaving aside opportunism and nostalgia, this seems a positive thing to me. In the history of Brazilian culture, Neo-concretism was without doubt one of the few moments in which we took it upon ourselves to adopt Rimbaud's challenge to be *absolutely modern*. Of course, I know well that the present mood heralds the crisis of the modern. Long before this, however, came my daily experience of the dreadful ignorance, incomprehension, rejection, resistance, and even panic regarding the modern that still characterizes our artistic circles. And this almost thirty years after Neo-concretism, eighty after Cubism, and one hundred and twenty after Cézanne.

R.B.

The Neo-concrete manifesto is clear: It proposes to take a critical position with regard to the mechanistic derivations of Concrete art. But it also proposes to defend a language of geometric, nonfigurative art against irrationalist tendencies of any sort. Dada and Surrealism can be nominally mentioned as such retrograde movements. Neo-concretism's core references are Mondrian, Pevsner, and Malevich. The manifesto defines the Neo-concrete battleground from the outset: constructive ideologies with their evolutionary interpretations of the history of

manifesto à obra de arte. Sua preocupação central é a criação de uma linguagem "concreta" que não se limite a uma simples representação do mundo exterior, mas que se torne uma linguagem própria, capaz de expressar a realidade interior do homem.

m a n i f e s t o n e o c o n c r e t o

Este manifesto é uma obra de arte em si mesma, apresentando uma linguagem visual baseada em formas geométricas e abstratas. No topo, há quatro imagens quadradas rotuladas: AMERICAS DE CASTRO, AMERICA DE GULLAR, LITUA DE GARE, e LITUA DE PARE. Abaixo, há mais duas imagens rotuladas: MARX ELL e ARNE. O texto do manifesto está disposto em colunas verticais, com uma linguagem densa e filosófica.

"Neo-concrete Manifesto." Jornal do Brasil, Sunday supplement, March 22, 1959. Courtesy of Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação do Jornal do Brasil.

art, proposals for social integration, and theories of production.¹ Neo-concretism upholds a commitment to a type of positive attitude found at the core of the constructive tradition: art as an instrument of social construction.

The Neo-concrete program is defined, at least in principle, at the outer limits of this positive attitude. Therefore, it is within this setting that we can analyze its intervention: the validity and interest of its proposals, its effectiveness, and, finally, the negative or critical element that it was able to articulate by means of construct with the constructive tradition. There can be no doubt about the constructive origins of the movement. The question is how it arose and how it evolved. A determining characteristic of Neo-concretism can therefore be found in its contradictory nature. Although circumscribed within the general lines of constructive ideologies, the Neo-concrete rationale is at the same time a more or less explicit denunciation of the crisis of these ideologies. Constrained by these broader delimitations, Neo-concretism polemicalizes (even by means of the artists' own practices) its

1. Throughout this text Brito uses the adjective *construtivo*, which we have translated as "constructive" rather than "Constructivist," except when he refers to Russian Constructivism.—*Trans.* (All explanatory notes by translators.)

own postulates and acts to violate them, at least in part. This is the Neo-concrete reality: It is the apex of the Brazilian constructive consciousness—generating perhaps its most sophisticated formulations—and, at the same time, the cause of its crisis, preparing for its own eclipse in the process of producing a localized art.

Let us return to the initial program of the manifesto to analyze the type of intervention that Neo-concretism attempted to achieve within the constructive tradition. In the outdated environment of Brazilian culture, Neo-concretism targeted Concretism and brought about a schism that emerged after several years of intense internal conflict. This conflict had a clear geographical configuration—Rio de Janeiro vs. São Paulo. But, in fact, this was not the real battleground. Mário Pedrosa's characterization of theoreticism on the part of the *paulista* [São Paulo] group and spontaneity from the *carioca* [Rio de Janeiro] group, rooted in the contrasting cityscapes, was merely a circumstantial, even tactical, maneuver to cloud a crucial issue that at the time had no clear-cut boundaries.²

The Origins of the Constructive Project

Let us briefly trace the first steps of Concretism in Brazil. In the early 1950s, the Grupo Frente—the breeding ground of many future Neo-concretists—was formed in Rio de Janeiro. Mário Pedrosa's presentation of the group's second exhibition at the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro in 1955 did not mention Concretism or even constructive tendencies. Perhaps he could not have, since the primitivist painter Elisa Martins da Silveira was also included in the group alongside Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, Hélio Oiticica, Aluísio Carvão, and Franz Weissmann. This grouping was typical of an extremely unstructured environment that was not able to comprehend the work of art as a distinct type of research. And yet it already represented a nucleus of opposition. The values implicit in Pedrosa's words are those of a politicization of art: "These artists are not joined together by worldliness, comradeship, or chance. Their greatest virtue remains a dread of eclecticism. They are all men and women of principle, convinced of their revolutionary mission, the regenerative mission of art. One thing unites them which they will not relinquish, they are ready to defend it against everybody and everything—the freedom of creation."

As we can see, the issue was not yet the imposition of a constructive idea upon artistic production. It was, fundamentally, the freeing of art from banality and its conscription within partisan programs within which it simply performed the role of ideological propaganda. Although in a somewhat disarticulated manner, the Grupo Frente marked an affirmation of the specificity of the work of art

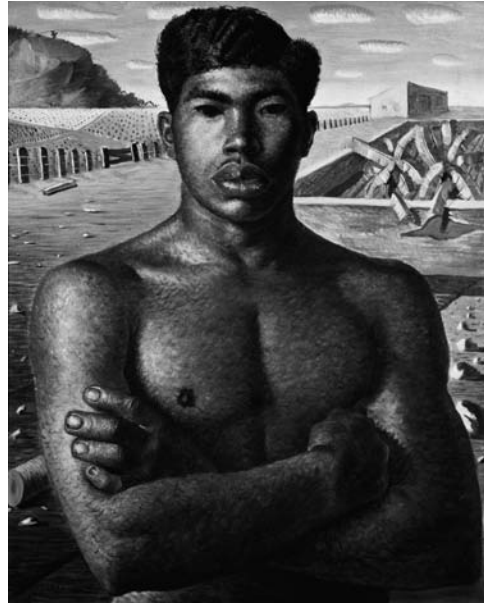
2. See Mário Pedrosa, "Paulistas and Cariocas" (1957), in *Mário Pedrosa: Primary Documents*, ed. Glória Ferreira and Paulo Herkenhoff, trans. Stephen Berg (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2015), pp. 274–75.

and an attempt to establish the conditions by which to take it seriously. Perhaps the absence of a firm stylistic position was essentially tactical, since the explicit defense of a geometric language (which was dominant in the group) could have been a risky maneuver leading to even greater isolation.

One need only reflect for a moment on the situation of modern art in Brazil at that time. As Ferreira Gullar wrote in 1960, [Candido] Portinari was without doubt the dominant figure, followed perhaps by [Lasar] Segall, [Emiliano] Di Cavalcanti, and [José] Pancetti, among others. These artists responded to broad ideological demands—the search for a national identity, the project of *brasilidade* [Brazilianness]—and confined themselves to traditional forms of representation. For example, Portinari interpreted the Cubists and Picasso in a merely anecdotal manner, without understanding the processes through which they broke with the dominant formal order.

Perhaps it would be an exaggeration to affirm that these works were profoundly anchored in the Brazilian cultural field. But they became, at least in part, the ideological instruments of certain political sectors that had Brazil's precarious modern-art machine at their disposal. There was a heavy intellectual investment (more so than financial) imposed upon this art. In contrast to the non-representational language of the constructive artists, these works *meant* a lot. They could be discussed through social and humanist rhetoric. Despite being “advanced,” they remained within existing representational systems of reality, which allowed them to be instrumentalized within broader debates.

The constructive project attacked precisely this type of representational system. There is one constant in its diverse tendencies: the search for a nonrepresentational, nonmetaphorical art. From the time it broke with the perspectival space of the Renaissance, and especially from the moment of Cézanne and the Cubists, art gained an awareness of its specificity and abandoned empiricism. Art began to be understood above all as a means of knowledge, as a rigorous formal organization irreducible to common sense. It was modern art's constructive axis that defin-



*Candido Portinari. Mestiço. 1934.
Courtesy of the Pinacoteca do Estado de
São Paulo and João Cândido Portinari.*

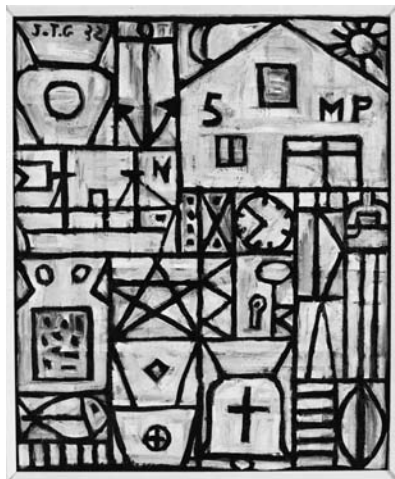
itively marked the evolution of this language and sought to rigorously formalize a *progressive* vision of a practice traditionally associated with irrational thought. This axis was a kind of positivism that attempted to rationalize art and bring it into the heart of social production. Its desire was to provide art with a positive role in the construction of a new technological society.

Abstract art arose as a means of emancipating the work of art: It was an affirmation of the work's autonomy vis-à-vis empirical reality, and a recognition that its operations of abstraction and formalization entailed processes implicit in all forms of knowledge. But while the various abstract *informel* movements moved ever closer to sensitivity, myth, and Romantic inspiration, the constructive tendencies radicalized their rational, abstract character and attempted to integrate themselves with science and technology within a larger process of social transformation. Art moved out of the shadows, where it hid from Logos and history, and came to be integrated within the realm of practical knowledge and positive apprehension.

In its own time—the 1920s and 1930s—the constructive interpretation of art represented a decisive step forward. It opened the way to thinking intelligently about the processes of producing art and helped sweep away some of its opacity. It made it possible to interrogate the means by which art constituted a language, that is, a system of meaning. In this, it attacked the entire metaphysical tradition implicit in Western art production. In the words of one of the most important theorists of the constructive, Michel Seuphor, founder (together with the Uruguayan Torres García) of the magazine *Cercle et Carré*: “Art will be submitted to our desire for certitude and precision, to our strivings toward awareness of an order. Like everything that issues from our brain or from our hands, it will be examined, it will pass through an intensive control.”

Initially, the constructive tendencies were a response to the *rupture* that occurred within artistic production and its social context after Cubism. This entailed not only a transformation of the procedures, methods, and theories of production but a rethinking of art as an activity whose social insertion no longer occurred “naturally.” There was a need to reevaluate art's wider significance. The development of the capitalist mode of production put the traditional position of art in crisis at the same time that it created the conditions to establish art as an autonomous activity with its own institutions. Once the social context of art was shattered, so was art as we knew it.

The response of the capitalist economy to this new situation was the organization of the market as we know it today. A system with particular characteristics designed not only to absorb artistic products but also to demand



Joaquín Torres-García. Station. 1932.
© Sucesión Joaquín Torres-García,
Montevideo, 2016.

and direct them. A system with sufficient speed to accompany processes of production and to function essentially as an ideological apparatus. A system whose social function is to register and accumulate a work of art's meanings so that it can then put the work back into circulation, duly inscribed with the marks of dominant ideology. The system is a channel through which all works of art are obliged to pass in order to effectively be considered works of art.

Constructive tendencies arose as possible responses in the realm of production and, by extension, the realm of cultural manifestation. The resulting rupture occurred along two axes: by means of the very concept of the work of art, and by its social insertion and circulation. The subsequent development of the constructive ideologies followed this double concern. For these ideologies, the issue was always how to create an art that could serve as a model for social construction. It is obvious that this does not always happen explicitly or manifestly, but rather concerns an epistemological delimitation.

In contrast to Dada and Surrealism (different responses to the same crisis), movements of constructive extraction have always aimed at a functional integration of art within society. Their intervention was didactic in nature. As with all liberal forces, they believed in Education with an upper-case *E*—their most consistent efforts were to beautify the social environment and aesthetically educate the masses. Soon after their appearance, these movements took on an almost messianic character, introducing a new visual order appropriate for a new social harmony. They spoke of the new world, the new man. It is not difficult to imagine them, in the end, as the aesthetic representatives of a capitalist utopia, the cultural arm of a solid and liberal social-democratic government.

De Stijl, Suprematism, Cercle et Carré, Bauhaus, and, later, Concrete art were fully implicated in the ideology of technological development, in a belief in the progressive rationalization of social relations (having as its horizon a hypothetical society in which art and life are truly intertwined and liberated from class positions). They were determined to transform the work of art in order to encompass all of these concerns. Broadly speaking, they dislocated the “Romantic” position of the artist. No longer was the artist considered an inspired being limited to a mythical sphere of “creation,” but rather a specialized social producer. The artist became an aesthetic producer (still aesthetic . . .), whose authority was conferred by the community.

It was, as noted above, a positivist moment. The desire for construction (Torres García's *vouloir construire*) would eradicate the ghosts that still haunted art. Reason, now applied to artistic formalization, attempted to eliminate the residues of prescientific thought. In the fight for dominance over nature and the rationalization of social processes, the constructive tendencies resolutely allied themselves with technological civilization. In terms of artistic production, what was specifically transformative was the constructive tendencies' affirmation of the essentially rational, rather than metaphysical, character of art, and the lines of research that developed as a result. It was of little importance that the “ideas” of many constructive artists (such as Mondrian's theosophy) existed in a register of religious delirium,

or that their productions (for example, Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*) were in fact unfeasible. What mattered was the positive attitude with which they confronted the production of art and their efforts to formulate methods and systems that would outlast the product itself as enduring concepts established over the course of an epistemological process. The principal objective of these concepts was to establish investigative procedures for art with intelligent, socialized foundations. To a certain point these concepts remain pertinent today in the struggle against the idea of art as an arcane and socially retrograde product more or less analogous to religion, wherein guilt provokes subliminal desires, resulting in art's regressive and reactionary function.

The constructive tendencies as a whole represented, above all, a drive toward a renewal of the social function for art. But this function had to be transparent and practical, no longer opaque, related to dreams and an unconscious, mythical realm. To accomplish this, they transformed aesthetics into a branch of practical knowledge that could be applied to everyday reality. This meant they tried their best to conquer the old position by means of institutions and the state.

Yet we must distinguish the various positions at stake within the so-called constructive tendencies. Despite being constrained by similar structures, they had a certain diversity of experiences that allow us to clarify fundamental theoretical differences. We can group such tendencies under the same title with a minimum of the inevitable reductionism that accompanies any theoretical work. But we must not forget their most significant differences. For our purposes, *political* differences and *productive* differences are of greatest interest. These can be detected, broadly speaking, in a comparative analysis between Soviet Constructivism and Western movements. We will now try to chart these differences.

Constructive "Politics"

It is obvious that such differences are the result of social differences between the two contexts. But this is not just obvious; from a methodological point of view, it is mandatory. Any analysis of a given constructive tendency must be situated at the center of the cultural politics of its context. This is because the constructive tendencies, more than any other, are characterized by their direct relation to the cultural politics of the state, and the willingness of a given system to admit art as an agent of aesthetic transformation of the environment. The variant position of the state in relation to art is the determining factor at the heart of constructive projects and the way they evolve as proposals. The question is whether they adopt a clearly reformist and utilitarian perspective, tending toward speculative utopianism, or whether they politicize art and seek to transform it into an ideological weapon. For the Western constructive artists—from Mondrian and Van Doesburg to Max Bill and the Concretists—the work of art could only be thought of as a social insertion in two senses: in a speculative and sublime mode (as in Mondrian's

vaguely Platonic ecstasies) and/or in terms of a necessarily acritical integration into contemporaneous processes of production (as in the Bauhaus and Ulm School). In other words, either art accepts the alienation prescribed by a statute³ of art operative more or less since the French Revolution (in which case the constructive project would be compromised) or it takes its place within industry and artists run the risk of acting directly for the system as its modernizing agents. Of course, this schematization does not capture all of the nuances of the positions at stake. It does, however, offer a basis for opening up a critical investigation of the constructive tendencies and their social achievements in particular. We must acknowledge the relevance of recent criticisms of these postulates as impossibly reformist. In one way or another, Western constructive projects are identified with one specific political position: social democracy. However, we need to study more deeply the maneuvers and mechanisms that gave rise to this situation. Among other things, this essay intends to introduce this issue within our cultural field and contribute to a deeper study of the political and ideological framework of constructive intervention in Brazil.

De Stijl

Let us analyze the program of the group founded in Holland in 1917 around the magazine *De Stijl*. Today, this group seems a jewel of idealistic thought. Its “Platonic” aim was to create a *universal plastic language* based on a vertical/horizontal structuring from which subjectivity would be banished as much as possible. The De Stijl artists gathered around a kind of *universal harmony* and worked toward the discovery of its laws. It is interesting to note that the architects of this group (Van Doesburg, Rietveld, Van Esteren) ultimately abandoned the quasi-spiritualist idealism of its origins in favor of formalist rationalism and even functionalism.

Despite the undeniable advance that it represented as a critique of the decadent metaphysics of Expressionism, it is clear that the De Stijl group did not escape from metaphysics. It remained within the field of the same expressionistic humanism, differing only in the *position* of its desire. Instead of a comforting, subjectivist art confined to the realm of private therapy, the group projected a mythically objective order framed within symmetrical deliriums that represented, above all, a paternalist intervention in society and the imposition of authoritarian reason. It is here that we arrive at the apparently mysterious point of contact between spiritualist idealism and functionalism, with its well-known mechanization of social relations and its positivist conception of society. It is revealing that all of the postulates of the De Stijl group were made for a paternalistic and authoritarian society: the denial of subjectivity (understood purely as a territory of confusion and *informel* impulses); the emphasis

3. Brito uses the term “statute” (*estatuto*) over the course of his essay to refer to the disciplinary apparatus of art as it operates socially, ideologically, and aesthetically.



Theo van Doesburg (in collaboration with Cornelis van Eesteren). Contra-Construction Project (Axonometric). 1923. Courtesy of MoMA/ Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY. © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

tures. The fact that they only managed to formulate their theories from metaphysical bases in a magical artistic realm beyond history obliges us to place the resultant ambiguities in their correct register. As I see it, by rejecting the political and any dependence on traditional aesthetics, these artists did not think of art as an experience of knowledge in a political and ideological context, but rather as a *search*, a spiritual adventure, ultimately as a formulation of universal absolutes.

on the horizontal/vertical order (the split between Van Doesburg and Mondrian occurred as a result of the former's decision to introduce the diagonal in his works . . .); the search for a universal language; the great *Form* that would lie beyond the specific, etc.

This is not to deny the contribution made by artists such as Mondrian toward the process of breaking away from the dominant formal order and, as a corollary, the status quo of art in society at that time. Rather, it is to situate those areas of functional transformation within their proper *dispositif* and determine the degree to which their work also remained confined within previously established structures.

The Bauhaus

The Bauhaus was without doubt the most representative movement in the development of the constructive tradition during the first half of the twentieth century. From its foundation during the Weimar Republic in 1919 to its closure in 1933 with the rise of Nazism, the Bauhaus was the synthesis of constructive ideologies in post-Cubist art. At the same time, it attempted to establish itself as the vanguardist penetration of these ideologies into society. It was a far-reaching project that included the creation of didactic, practical proposals for the social integration of art. Broadly speaking, it tried to establish an aesthetic for contemporary civilization

that would eventually shape all of its activities. Its objective was the rational, humane, and aesthetically progressive use of the full range of modern industrial resources. Art would abandon its traditional speculative realm and take on the task of organizing the environment.

Despite being a haven for artists such as Klee and Kandinsky, the Bauhaus was synonymous with rationalism in the field of arts. It also adopted a type of “natural,” modern, and progressive position with regard to the relation between art and society. As the Ulm School of the 1950s demonstrates, the basic principles that directed the activities of the Bauhaus remained the practical and theoretical reference points for almost all constructive movements, particularly those up until the early 1960s. The variations in constructive proposals in their respective attempts to establish a positive function for art within society were still attempts to integrate works of art into industrial production, and they were conditioned by functionalist premises that determined the artist’s participation in the construction of a *new environment*.

This despite the fact that for decades, capitalist societies had demonstrated beyond a doubt what artistic participation in production really meant: the end of an interest in form as an aesthetic practice and organizing principle, and the entry of the work of art into a field of competition and consumer appeal in which form, submitted to the authoritarian pressures of class, is transformed into an instrument for the distribution of *status*. The dream of *design*, with its ambition to “spiritualize” the everyday, its desire to create transcendence within the modern environment, finally revealed itself to be grossly positivist and petit-bourgeois. Artists were assimilated into the system as mechanical agents for a consumer logic that divided social space into tangential worlds and manipulated desires according to the imperative of class ascendancy. This served the contemporary capitalist strategy of channeling singularities, even perverse ones, into the very heart of the consumer apparatus (for example, by producing a simulacrum of sexual liberation).



Herbert Bayer. Cover of Bauhaus Dessau. 1926. Courtesy of MoMA/ Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY. © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

Starting with design, it is possible to analyze constructive ideologies and their complicity with the very society that they hoped to transform. The critical process of the Bauhaus was fully in place and concentrated at the very heart of its cultural politics. Let us observe what *Comunicación* had to say in its volume dedicated to the Bauhaus:

Identifying the artist's actual marginality (per the ideological argument offered up by official romanticism), the Bauhaus aimed to construct a rationalist alternative appropriate to the needs of the "humanization" of industrial technology. A rationalized art was the guarantee of social commitment and the only way to overcome "the deplorable abyss between reality and idealism" (Gropius). The contradictions of this argument begin with the instrumentalist and meta-historical use of basic concepts: What the Bauhaus proposed as reason and as a requirement for social reality was, in fact, only the ideology of the ruling class and the interests of capitalist production.⁴

Of course, the Bauhaus was the only historically possible solution for the constructive movements of the first half of the century. Its reformism, its mechanical way of establishing links between artworks and the rest of social production, arose less from the personal and political convictions of its agents than from the structural pressures exerted upon them. These structural pressures increased in the second half of this century (and, of course, with the development of capitalism), leading to the growth of a schism within the constructive tendencies that neutralized some of their more substantial proposals. It is in the midst of this division that Neo-concretism appeared and developed.

Soviet Constructivism

Although to a certain extent constrained by the same limits of production that characterized Western ideologies, it is clear that Russian Constructivism (1920) operated in a different environment and generated effects of a different type. Not only was it in the ultimate vanguard as concerns the social dimension of art—at least as long as there were real possibilities in this regard—but its project for artistic production also had very specific materialist intentions.

While Seuphor, for example, made his claim on the basis of an innocent, if not mythical, rationalism, and the De Stijl group speculated about a new universal harmony vaguely inspired by Shoenmaecker's theosophical deliriums, the Soviet Constructivists (including not only Tatlin's and Rodchenko's group but also other tendencies debated at the time, such as Productivism) attempted to incorporate

4. "Bauhaus," *Comunicación* 12 (Madrid: Alberto Corazón, 1971).



Vladimir Tatlin. Model of the Monument to the Third International. 1920.
 Courtesy of MoMA/ Licensed by SCALA/
 Art Resource, NY.

dialectical materialism into art, a field of human activity that was traditionally closer to religion. The issue was to conceive and produce art in a materialist mode. In *Constructivism*, Alexei Gan wrote:

The first declaration of Constructivism is the following: down with speculative activity in the work of art. We declare total war on art.

Art was never something distinct from the products that arise from the hands of men, it was neither eternal nor established once and for all. Its forms, social significance, means, and objectives varied according to changes in technique and in the economic, social, and political systems that conditioned the various phases of social development.

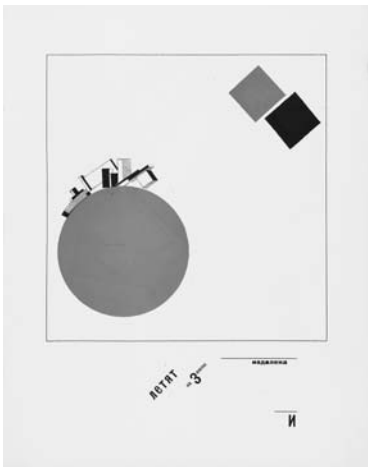
Art is indissolubly linked to theology, metaphysics, and mysticism. Marxists should strive to scientifically explain the extinction of art and formulate new phenomena for artistic work in the new historical environment of our era.

The theory of historical materialism, which serves as the basis from which the Constructivists comprehend history in general and the fundamental laws of developmental processes in capitalist society, also serves as a method for studying art history. The latter—like all social phenomena—is the product of human activity conditioned by the tech-

nical and economic environment in which it arises and develops. But when the Constructivists found themselves in direct relation to art—in their work clothes in the studio—they also created, for the first time, a science out of the history of the formal development of art.⁵

As we can see, Soviet Constructivism displaced the central issue of Western constructive tendencies. It passed from the aesthetic to the political, from the aesthetic organization of the environment to the political and ideological construction of a new society. The positive sense that the Bauhaus tried to give to the teaching of art and its social integration, for example, remained idealistic (formalistic) in relation to the constructive project. This was not just because the Western art tendencies were limited by a mythical autonomy (there were always productive rules such as the horizontal-vertical scheme that were raised to metaphysical paradigms), but also because their social projection occurred in the realm of aesthetics. Art did not fulfill, and was neither expected nor intended to fulfill, any kind of political role. For the Western constructive tendencies, social classes did not exist; there was only humanity and its linear progress toward a scientific and technological civilization.

In contrast, Soviet Constructivism evolved in an environment that forced it to adopt a political attitude toward the work of art. It tried to place art in a field of revolutionary activity. Failing that, it handed art over once and for all to reactionary



El Lissitzky. Of Two Squares: A Suprematist Tale in Six Constructions. 1922. © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ProLitteris, Zurich.

forces and fought against it as an instrument of those same forces. That is why when the artists spoke of “organizing life,” they were not only thinking of rationalizing the human presence within the industrial economy. Guided by political and necessarily political-ideological maneuvers, these artists were forced to position themselves in relation to society in a mode we might call nonartistic. Art was not only an aesthetic and humanizing activity; it was also an ideological device that belonged to bourgeois society and required its investment. The objective was therefore to break with art’s traditional status and transform its ideological functions.

Because of the specific conditions under which it operated, Soviet Constructivism can thus be analyzed as the peak of a sequence of constructive tendencies of the first half of the century. Its proposals were most fruitful in terms of the determining issues of the debate: the manner and direction in which art should be positioned socially, and the way it should be produced in opposition to its traditionally intuitive and para-religious mechanisms.

5. Brito drew from a Spanish translation of Gan’s 1922 text published in *Constructivismo*, trans. F. Fernandes Buey (Madrid: Alberto Corazón, 1973).

By broadly inscribing art's participation in the political and ideological struggle in concrete terms (rather than simply as propaganda), the Constructivists produced a decisive rupture at two levels. The first concerned the position of art in bourgeois society and cleared the way for an escape from this aesthetic confinement; the second, a corollary to the first, allowed one to think of art within a field of ideological transformations. This signaled a fundamental attack on the dominant ideology of art for art's sake (art restricted to a closed social space and condemned to repetition). The revolutionary Soviets, by adopting a radical interpretation of constructive premises—the universal intelligibility of a visual work—fought for the transformation of art into a social instrument within reach of all and unobstructed by institutions or class divisions. The Soviet Constructivist project was broadly collectivist but not authoritarian: Art would continue as a manifestation of singularities, and no longer of individualities (the result of the humanist conception of the individual).

A more rigorous comparative study could bring to the surface the specific operations by which Soviet Constructivism largely avoided the reformist character of the Western constructive movements. As we are interested in the penetration of constructive ideology into Brazil and, more specifically, the Neo-concrete position with regard to this ideology, this is beyond the scope of our study. But it would certainly be useful: Anything that can elucidate the “politics” of the constructive project would help to situate the *unconscious* of each movement, its unconscious class positions, in short, the limits that demarcate its practice.

The Limits of the Constructive Project

Having briefly reconstituted the initial constructive trajectory out of which Concretism and Neo-concretism arose, we can now speak of its limits as a theory of production and as a proposal for cultural action. The limits of the constructive tendencies—which originally arose as an affirmation of rationality and a belief in progress—occurred at the very moment these tendencies lost their grasp on the situation. These limits are represented historically by Dadaism and Surrealism (without forgetting the differences between them). Dadaism and Surrealism are the “other” of the constructive tendencies. We can consider this duo—constructivism (in the most broad sense of the term) on the one hand, and Dadaism and Surrealism on the other—as divergent cultural responses to the same situation: the collapse of nineteenth-century values (aesthetic, philosophical, and moral) and the confrontation with a nonorthodox reality that expanded the boundaries of thought in the twentieth century.

It would be too simplistic and neat to reduce a cultural antagonism to a duality that was, at the end of the day, complementary: constructivism representing the traditional Apollonian tendency and Dadaism and Surrealism, the Dionysian. It seems in this case that the most fruitful approach is to analyze them as relatively frustrated attempts to understand and act in response to a situation that in many ways was clear-

ly beyond either of their programs. It is necessary to think of the margins of these movements—the void that appeared between them and the reality in which they operated—just as it is necessary to indicate their positive points and the possibilities created therein. It is not possible here to extensively analyze the differences between these movements, so we will examine only their directions.

The functionalist rationality of the constructive artists perceived the Dadaist and Surrealist proposals as an extension of the metaphysical content of the Expressionists and their retrograde formal schemes. They detected, correctly, the links that connected these movements to the roots of Expressionism and their conceptual boundaries and ideologies. Thus, the constructive artists rejected these movements as cultural formulations, identifying them as reactions against a progressive artistic mentality. Obviously, this did not occur in the works of all artists—it is always possible to interpret any work in diverse ways, depending on the viewpoint of the observer. Thus, the Dadaist Kurt Schwitters had clear links with the constructive project, while Hans Arp was a Dadaist who exhibited alongside the Surrealists and Constructivists. The distance between these movements should be established from broader considerations pertaining to cultural politics.

From the outset, the constructive tendencies had a very particular position in relation to art history. This position was linked, among other things, to a continuous drive within Western thought toward the scientific organization of knowledge—its progressive (epistemological) awareness of the need to rigorously formalize the data within a given field. Its desire was above all to regulate, objectify, clarify, and, finally, apply. But despite forming a self-declared “modern movement” and accompanying modernizing project, despite the value given to experimentation in the manipulation of artistic languages and their attack on their dominant order, the constructive tendencies remained confined to a rationality and liberal humanism typical of the nineteenth century. The proof is that, even in their later manifestations in the 1950s, they did not take up the two fundamental twentieth-century theories that marked a clear break with nineteenth-century paradigms: the theories of Marx and Freud.

Broadly speaking, the constructive project imagined itself as a continuation of a nineteenth-century dream transposed onto the realms of culture and art. There was no real breach with the world of the Cartesian subject, the world of ideological “objectivity,” and the world of reason. The constructive transformations were local; they occurred internally within artistic languages yet failed to intervene within the social rules of these languages as practices. The social *desire* was either utopian, if not delirious, or an aspiration to functional integration within the dominant mode of production. Constructive inscription was not, strictly speaking, critical.

This explains, in part, the structural incapacity of the constructive project to comprehend aspects of Surrealism and especially Dadaism (in particular Duchamp) in their correct registers. These were the aspects that without doubt served as the foundation for the critical tendencies that emerged in the 1960s (for example, Neo-dadaism). They were related above all to a desire to criticize art as a

sublimating (and conformist) social practice and a desire to take a belligerent position against the social order itself. At the root of the Dadaist and Surrealist projects was a refusal to consider art and literature—or culture itself—outside the sociopolitical context and thus capable of developing autonomously, each discipline reflecting upon itself. In contrast, these movements refused reduction to their own body of thought and productions; they aspired to be a transgressive and violent movement that would eclipse them.

There was *something* about Dadaism, for example, that was part of the urge to escape the limits of Western rationality. We could define it as the heterogeneous, wild, free, and irrational that paradoxically had a clear ideological function: to signify an overarching critical position with regard to the system. Dadaism called into question not only the language of art and the function of art but the very *statute* of art, the relationship between the work of art and society. The Surrealist and Dadaist utopia (it is feasible to consider them together on this point) differed radically from the constructive utopia. The latter respected, generally speaking, the capitalist utopia, as its prime motive was the rationalization and humanization of current social relations. The former was confusedly linked to a revolutionary project or, at the very least, the fight against certain structures of power.

With the exception of Soviet Constructivism, this element of the constructive tendencies resulted from their own efforts. They searched for the delimitation of an operational field and the social recognition of this field's autonomy. It was impossible for their agents to position themselves critically in relation to society within the limits they proposed; as specialized workers, their contact with politics was distant and remained only an ideal, albeit often a socialist one. For these naive rationalists, culture was primarily a factor of the progress of civilization and not a social space in which ideological transformation could occur. The revolutionary desire at stake in Dadaism and Surrealism that led to the conception of critical maneuvers (also naive, clearly) aimed at affecting the whole of society was present only in Soviet Constructivism (and here only in very specific forms). In practice, the Western constructive tendencies limited themselves to making declarations, and even then in compliance with existing models.

In general, the constructive agents exorcised the “other” Dadaism and the “other” Surrealism with a magic word: Romanticism. They reduced their complex expectations, successes, and failures to mere Romantic residues, to anachronistic remnants resulting from some essential mistake in perceiving the *modern spirit*, the evolution of society and industrialization. The Neo-concrete manifesto itself in 1959 labeled the “accursed pair” as regressive and reactionary. But of course, things are not so easily resolved.

There is no doubt that in the field of visual production, Surrealism was characterized by the maintenance of an exhausted formal order still linked to traditional perspectival space. The great achievement of the constructive movement was to undertake the eradication of this order and thus allow the appearance of more contemporary interpretations of the specific systems of signification of mod-

ern society. While Surrealist rhetoric preferred metaphor as its representative resource, the constructive artists fought to break away from the metaphorical space in which painting was confined in order to develop a theory of visual production entirely disconnected from representation. While Surrealism defended a mythical conception of the work of art, the constructive artists represented an attempt to transform art into a methodical production that could be understood and transmitted as a specific language.

But it is impossible to ignore the *Surrealist operation* within the broader cultural field. The questions raised by the critical discourses of Breton and Bataille often make the theorizations of Seuphor and, later, Max Bill seem infantile and reformist. Today, an obviously academic painter such as Magritte can be considered as worthwhile an object of study as Mondrian. Only the constructive tendencies could try to destroy the languages of Dada and the Surrealists: They came to represent scandal, the death of reason, ideological pessimism, and the rejection of the linear progress that the constructives had tried to build. Far beyond its innocuous *underground* productions, and obviously far beyond its exploitation by mass media (be it by Salvador Dalí or the North American culture industry), Surrealism raised decisive issues for the entire practice of art: the question of desire in production, the relationship between art and politics, the integration of art as an institution within the bourgeois order, the Freudian unconscious, etc.

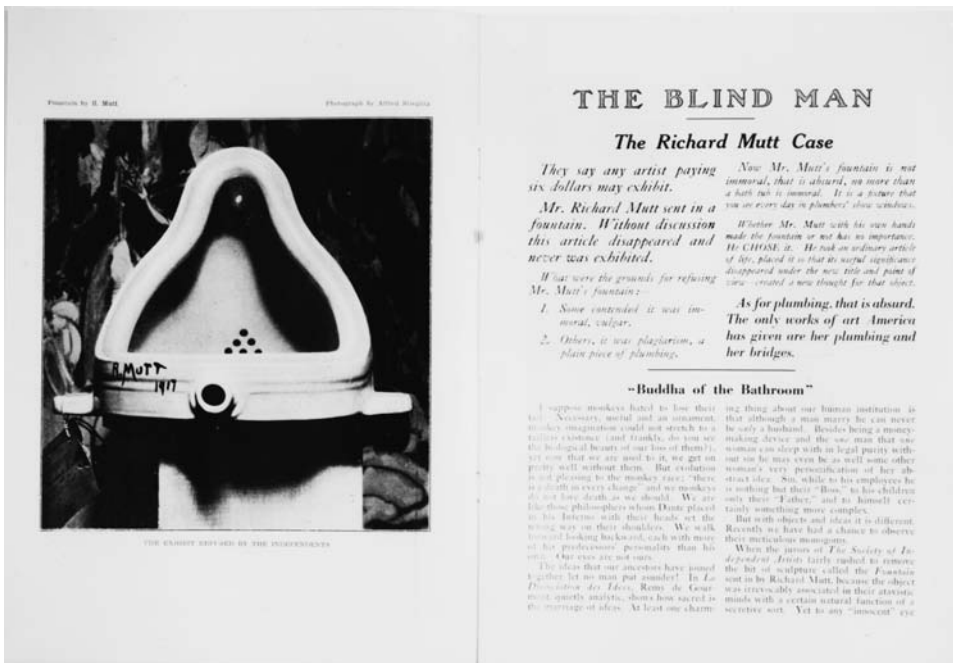
The constructive tendencies rejected Freud's theories because of Surrealism. They remained detached from the radical displacement of the Cartesian subject achieved by psychoanalysis and defended nineteenth-century rationalism. If the Surrealists misinterpreted Freud by over-romanticizing him, the constructive artists did not even reach him. They marched on, bound to a mechanical (at times extraordinarily mechanical) objectivist idea of the process of artistic production. The subject-artist that one recognizes implicitly in their projects is the same subject of nineteenth-century science, dominated by the ideology of objective knowledge and ignorant of the implications that arise from an awareness of one's own position in the production of this knowledge. We could argue that the constructive tendencies substituted the Romantic and mythical concept of the inspired artist (classical idealism) for an empiricist one: the idea of the artist as a specialized producer, with no transcendence or other implications.

This "positivist" conception of artistic practice hindered the rigorous comprehension of its meaning in twentieth-century capitalist societies. It failed from the start by not appreciating art's position within the cultural field and its ideological implications. It did not even begin to imagine art as something beyond an aesthetic exercise or a source of visual information. That is, it was unable to see it as it really was: an instrument, an institution, a more or less closed circuit with a formalized history (the famous art history) and a specific market.

Duchamp

Marcel Duchamp, obviously, cannot be considered a constructive artist (although neither was he Surrealist, despite his connections to Breton). He developed a critical point of view with regard to art and understood it as a social institution with its own laws and specific functions. Duchamp understood that the museum was more than just a repository of works; it was the very frame of the social appearance of art. Duchamp's rupture was the result of his own position toward art, his very act of comprehending art as a system integrated within a social ideological field. Not only did he never raise the issue of art's participation in the creation of a new environment (the core of the constructive project), he completely rejected the myth of formal research. In order to understand the functional rules of the institution of art, Duchamp did not investigate the forms of the art object, but rather directed his research to the forms of producing art, forms that would transform his ideas into artistic products that could effectively dialogue with the institution.

Undoubtedly, the subject-artist Marcel Duchamp was not another victim of the rational ideology of the nineteenth century. He knew that to be an artist involved taking part in a game with predetermined rules, that art is the result of social investments directed toward a certain activity, indefinable by technique but



R. Mutt (Marcel Duchamp). Fountain. 1917. Shown in Beatrice Wood et al., *The Blind Man 2*, May 1917. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY. © Succession Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2016.

capable of being individualized (without risk of confusion with the physical sciences or culinary arts, for example). Thus, as Marc le Bot points out, Duchamp can be compared with Marcel Mauss: “His initiative in inventing the ‘ready-made’ and introducing it into the museum was in a certain way derived from experimental sociology or ethnology. His *démarche* seemed to support what Marcel Mauss stated at the same moment: that the object of art was what was recognized as such within the value system of the social group.”⁶

The position of the subject-artist Marcel Duchamp, and possibly the position toward the art-mechanism that one can extract from Dadaism, represent a step forward in relation to the constructive understanding of the practice of art, its limits, and its possible ideological effects in contemporary society. Among other things, Dadaism introduced a new experimental velocity, a mobility attuned to the creation of new schemes. This soon became an obligation for contemporary artists, who were forced to move faster than the market, developing their work in such a way that would put them ahead of the inevitable process of absorbing and ideologically transforming their product.

Duchamp introduced a strategic intelligence at the very heart of the process of artistic production, previously confined to idealistic inclination and an impervious relationship between producer and product. This relationship obeyed the following logic: Contact with all external factors surrounding production was experienced *phantasmagorically* through the *properties* of the object itself. Art as a social institution, as history, imposed itself authoritatively upon its servant, masking the real relations that it maintained through it. The subject-artist was placed in such a position that all he could do was aspire to admission into an institution that did not even reveal itself as such. From the point of view of institutional structure, even the ruptures that haphazardly occurred in representational schemas could be seen as simple continuities. In summary, the artist fulfilled his social role through a system of opaque mediation—the art institution—that denied him any political understanding of his practice. For the producer, the art object was turned into an occasion for the chaotic and imaginative projection of questions raised by his own practice that could only emerge in this way—as unconscious projections, meta-physical speculations, etc.

The constructive tendencies did not appear to take on the institutional and systemic character of art in contemporary society. In fighting against the existing social statute of art—its “unreality”—and postulating an active participation in life and the environment, the constructive tendencies appeared to have forgotten about the market. They anticipated the dissolution of art into various sectors of industrial production that barely gained outline in reality. There is no doubt that their production had a decisive influence on architecture and design, but we need to focus our attention on the degree to which this occurred. The overall project to “organize life” did not become the practical program of any government and in general did not even affect industry (unless we focus on the design industry itself).

6. Marc le Bot, “Marcel Duchamp,” *L'Arc* 59 (1974).

Thus it became an ideal, a distant horizon for the artists' working process. The result of this was that their practice remained out of touch and confined to the same social register as, for example, Expressionist practice. The artistic object continued as before, establishing the same *phantasmagorical* relationship with its producer: a paradigm of something unfulfilled, futurist, speculative, a whisper full of distorted, imaginary, and even regressive meaning.

Clearly, neither Duchamp nor the Dadaists escaped from this situation. Neither did they believe that they could have escaped, nor did they base their actions on this belief. They did, however, invent a new distance, a new combat strategy, that has proved to be increasingly productive since the 1960s. This strategy allows, if not for the transformative, positive attitude advocated by the constructives, then at least for a critical negation, an insertion of the work of art into the field of ideological conflicts. Our interest in the positions held by Duchamp, Dadaism, and Surrealism is vindicated by the development of artistic production in the second half of the century; these positions determined transformations in the languages and objectives of even the constructive tendencies. We will try to demonstrate how this occurred with Neo-concretism.

The Constructive Avant-Garde in Brazil

To theorize the effects of Concretism and Neo-concretism in Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s is a task that can only be done partially and imperfectly. In this case, the key issue is to develop a historical study of the penetration of the constructive ideology and its influence in the country from the 1930s (with the formation of Brazilian modern architecture) up to the Neo-concrete explosion of the 1960s. This type of study will substantially inform the analysis of the emergence of specific phenomena that occurred within this context. It will also clearly determine the effects of these phenomena in the Brazilian cultural environment and uncover the socioeconomic factors that motivated its insertion.



Germany exhibition room, IV Bienal de São Paulo. 1957.
 Courtesy of Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Suevo. © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ ProLitteris
 Zurich/ VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn/ The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation.

At this point, we find ourselves close to ground zero, since no theoretical work has been done. It is therefore only possible to analyze the basic concepts at play in the Concretism/Neo-concretism debate, to try to situate them in a broader frame of reference, and to begin to question critically their influence in the history of art production in Brazil. And, of course, to indicate and discuss the significance of the Neo-concrete rupture with regards to some of the postulates of Concretism.

The more or less simultaneous formation in the field of the so-called visual arts of a vanguard of geometric abstraction in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in the early 1950s responded to much more complex issues than a mere enthusiasm for recent exhibitions by Max Bill, Calder, or Mondrian. What counted were the structural pressures that Brazilian artists and intellectuals, as members of the middle class, felt in this respect. Any avant-garde project is always an attempt to understand a situation and evolve with it. Why, then, a constructive avant-garde? This is the basic question behind any historical discussion of that period.

To begin, there was a limited response to the development of art as a language and producer of formal schemas related to the interpretive process and to perception of reality. One can say that the interest of Brazilian artists in constructive formulations marked, to a certain extent, the first articulate and intelligent contact with the transformations modern art had provoked within artistic traditions. To a certain degree, Brazil did not have any modern art: It had not yet understood the transformations of Cubism and subsequent movements. Tarsila do Amaral, Di Cavalcanti, Cícero Dias, [Alberto] Guignard, and Portinari were pre-Cubist painters, even though some of them incorporated Cubist elements intelligently into their work. They fell short of the radical transformation proposed by Cubism and remained confined, despite the quality and interest of their work, to traditional schemas of representation. A non-anecdotal interpretation of art history should work at the level of concepts and ruptures produced in systems of representation and not at the level of chronological sequence or superficial transformations.

Modern art begins with the rupture of space organized by perspective and continues as a persistent inquiry into the nature of the relationship between painting and reality. In the eyes of the Cubists, it was Cézanne who questioned this relationship and established a new position for the artist with regard to painting. The bonds established in the triangulation of artist-art-reality were dissolved, and it became necessary to rethink them. By breaking away from the established Western representational system, modern art displaced the axis of observation traditionally established by the subject-artist. This axis no longer revolved around a simple relationship between artist and reality, per convention, but around the relationship between artist and art understood as a specific process of knowledge. This process is comparable to that which occurred in science when it abandoned empiricism.

Of course, not everything that is called modern art fits within these terms. Tatlin, for example, correctly understood that twentieth-century works broke with the metaphoric character of the work of art, and constructed his corner-reliefs

free of interior, metaphoric space so that they functioned as elements of the environment into which they were inserted. Yet respected painters such as Rouault and Chagall did nothing more than return to a representational conceit, to a manifestly conservative idea of art as expressed in subjective content. This certainly did not prevent them, however, from being called modern.

In Brazil, the fundamental concepts of modern art only came to be understood and practiced from the time of the “constructive avant-garde.” Tarsila, Di Cavalcanti, Guignard, and Portinari, among others, followed the processes and acted in a manner comparable to the groups that preceded the appearance of Suprematism and Constructivism in Russia, as laid out by Camilla Gray. The Brazilian art context only began to deal critically or productively with modern art and its subsequent implications in the 1950s. Following contact with these concepts, the Concretist and Neo-concrete discourses were elaborated with the explicit aim of bringing them to fruition.

The basic formulation of Brazilian Concretism concerns the specificity of art as an informational process, its irreducibility to ideological content, and the objectivity of its manner of production. Waldemar Cordeiro, who up to a certain point can be considered the leader of the Concretist painters in São Paulo, put it this way: “On the one hand, the partiality of the romanticists who attempt to turn art into mystery and miracle discredits the social potential of formal creation. On the other hand, the intellectualism of the ideologues charges art with tasks that it cannot fulfill, as they are contrary to its very nature.”

The interest, then, was to continue the work of Malevich, Mondrian, and Max Bill and the Swiss Concretists. One indication of the local enthusiasm for the rationalistic postulates of Swiss Concrete art was the prize awarded to a sculpture by Max Bill, *Tripartite Unity*, at the 1951 São Paulo Bienal. This enthusiasm prompted two young artists, Mary Vieira and Almir Mavignier, to move to Europe, where they decided to stay. Among those who remained in Brazil, this enthusiasm caused the spread of an unmistakably geometrical tendency and the constructive concepts



Antonio Maluf. Poster design for São Paulo Bienal 1, 1951. Courtesy of the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo and Projeto Antonio Maluf.

implicit within it. While Europe and the United States began to explore *informel*, Latin America, especially Brazil and Argentina, took on the constructive tradition and transformed it into its own avant-garde project.

The greatest international representative of this constructive tradition was Max Bill's Concrete art, the last important constructive formulation of the first half of this century. Concrete art (1936) intended to accomplish two basic transformations/continuations within this tradition: one, the radical incorporation of mathematical processes within artistic production, the consequences of which can be seen in Vantongerloo's work; two, the establishment of more vigorous bases from which the constructive project might integrate art into industrial society, which resulted in the opening of the Ulm School (Hochschule für Gestaltung) in 1951. Concrete art claimed to be the adult consciousness of the constructive tendencies. It was a progression of a modern movement considerably shaken by the Second World War and represented a typical escape route for such tendencies in contemporary capitalist society. From a theoretical point of view, Bill's formulations are little more than an anthology and synthesis of developments in this direction, re-adopting the term "Concrete," coined by Van Doesburg, in an attempt to consolidate the autonomy of processes of artistic production and emphasize their constructive, systematic character. For Van Doesburg, the term simply meant a redefinition of the concept of abstraction, a search for a better adjustment to the truth contained in an artwork. He stated (quoted by Gullar in his article "Concrete Art"): "Concrete and not abstract painting, because we have already surpassed the period of speculative research and experiments. The artists, in search of purity, were forced to abstract the natural forms that conceal the plastic elements. . . . Concrete and nonabstract painting, because there is nothing more Concrete than a line, a color, a surface."⁷

With time, however, the term *Concrete* came to increasingly indicate a constructive direction within the nonfigurative tendencies and a formal opposition to *informel*. While the latter often recovered a Romantic ideology—subjectivist and intuitive—Concrete art in the 1940s and early 1950s became synonymous with rationalist, objectivist work that privileged mathematical procedures and positive integration into society. It took a stance so that the artist—transformed into a kind of superior designer, a researcher of forms for industrial use—could participate in various sectors of urban life within a complex industrial society. The Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm was in many ways a continuation of the Bauhaus, adapted to the historical circumstances of the 1950s.

In a certain manner the school is a crystallization of one of the main currents dominant in the Bauhaus: formalist rationalism. There are no signs of negation in the practice of the Ulm School—it represented an effort to use *aesthetic values* to shape the production of social forms with values implicitly originating in functionalist ideology. Its *desire* was to rationalize the production of forms, submitting them

7. Ferreira Gullar, "Arte Concreto," *Suplemento Dominical do Jornal do Brasil*, June 25, 1960, p. 3.

to the technical control of aesthetic operations. Its unspoken premises, in short, its ideology, lay in aesthetic and functional control. At the core of its justification was the traditional reformist project of rationalizing the relations of production within the capitalist system.

The idea of cultural politics implicit in Ulm and Swiss Concretism was generally based on a programmatic rationality that could be defined more or less as follows: Culture is a specific activity with its own autonomous development (understood to be nonideological), which demands specialized work and requires a centralized program bolstered by the state. There is always an institutional aspect involved in such cultural practices. The operative field of signification they produce is the collective—society as a whole—and not social classes in conflict. There is a predetermined idea of the social—perhaps from Weber—implicit in Concrete art that claims the social as a pure fact, with the collective only vaguely conceived within it. There is no postulation, for example, of an ideological field in which certain social interests would enter into contact with other interests derived from distinct experiences. The cultural struggle is a linear struggle focused exclusively on its own past and the realm of pure ideas and formal orders. The contradiction is obvious: Where in all of this is ideological struggle, which one can observe daily in the mass media, in so-called habits, in sexuality, and in the production of art as well?

Choosing Concrete art in the early 1950s meant choosing a universalist and evolutionist cultural strategy. Let us consider for a moment the visual production of the movement and try to analyze the effects it generated for the work of art. We must begin by analyzing the movement's theory of production. Undoubtedly, Brazilian Concretism was conscious of its position in the development of art history—it openly claimed to be a new stage in the sequence of a search for the true foundations of artistic research. In this way, it was a theoretically informed proposal. Moreover, since Swiss Concretism was to a certain extent "scientific," not only did Gestalt theory and its laws shape the movement's idea of visual perception and the optical field, its production process metaphorically approximated the practical procedures of science and technology.

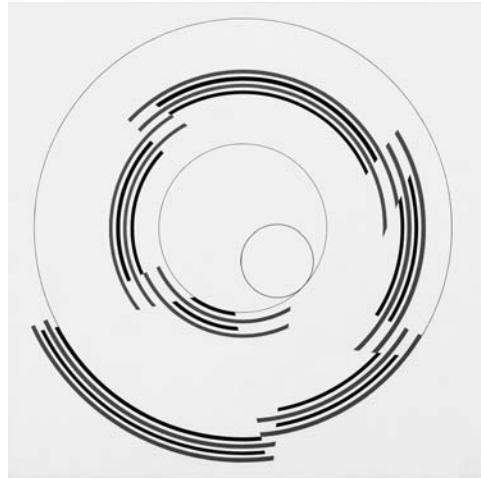
With reference to art, one was no longer in the field of creation but rather in the field of *invention*. The game consisted of ingeniously manipulating forms, of producing a maximum degree of visual information, of establishing semiotic processes that would force the spectator to break away from conventional systems of perception and integrate them into the proposed new order. There was a reevaluation of the effects of research and of the invention of forms, along with faith "in the social potential of formal creation." In comparison to the traditional system, Concrete art positioned itself in a manner analogous to that of Concrete poetry in the face of the "old formal and syllogistic discursive basis" of conventional and discursive poetry. In both cases, the issue was to break away from the dominant formal order and its system of meanings.

The operation consisted of restructuring languages in such a way that would allow them to capture, "without wear or regression," the dynamics of contempo-

rary signification in a world in which conventional formal systems were decrepit and inoperative. Concrete art attempted to act upon the syntax of language itself, to incite a rupture in the dominant mode of articulation and its sclerotic syntax. In the case of poetry and literature, unity of verse represented the conventional and linear rationale for logical-discursive sequence (“the synthetic-perspectivist organization,” according to Augusto de Campos). In the case of the visual arts, it pertained to Renaissance perspectival space—“figure and ground”—and the necessarily metaphorical sense of painting as a space of representation, in which the real is only indicated by way of symbolic presence. In fact, the function of art within this epistemological order was to illustrate the real, to re-exhibit it. The rupture with this representative order signified, clearly, the recognition of and a demand for a new specificity for the work of art.

Departing from this newly conquered autonomy, the Concretists projected a method of artistic production that brought together the inventive manipulation of forms and a rigorous balancing of data (as in science). Influenced by Norbert Wiener’s book *The Human Use of Human Beings*, the Concretists were not far from thinking of art in terms of cybernetics. In other words, art would be a kind of engineering of the visual communication process. A brief analysis of Concrete visual production immediately reveals its poles of interest and therefore, to a certain extent, its *truth*. This production was characterized by the systematic exploration of serial forms and time as mechanical movement. It defined itself through strictly optical-sensorial aims. In opposition to representational content, Concretism proposed a perceptual game: a program of optical exercises that were in themselves “beautiful” and significant, and the development and invention of new visual syntagms concerned with renewing the possibility of communication. In their capacity to act as feedback (to use the terminology of information theory), the works fought against entropy. Concrete art is an aesthetic repertory of the optical and sensorial possibilities prescribed by Gestalt theory.

A *Gestalt* (and not simply intuitive) apprehension of space was at the heart of Concrete visual art. Concrete art tried to avoid an appreciation of content in favor of a reading that would extract what was the core of the artist’s work: *informational*



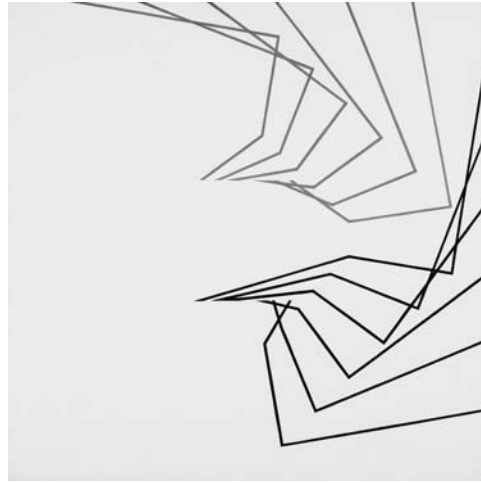
Maurício Nogueira Lima.
Spatial Development of the Spiral.
1954. Courtesy of the Pinacoteca do Estado
de São Paulo and Jacqueline F. Barros.

processes and messages. The main interest was the work's organization as message. As an example, the São Paulo Concretist group refused to use color expressively (in this aspect, as we will see, there was always a difference with regard to the Rio de Janeiro group). Color should not constitute an autonomous, nonrelational value in itself but instead function as a divisive element of space, part of the informational dynamic of the work.

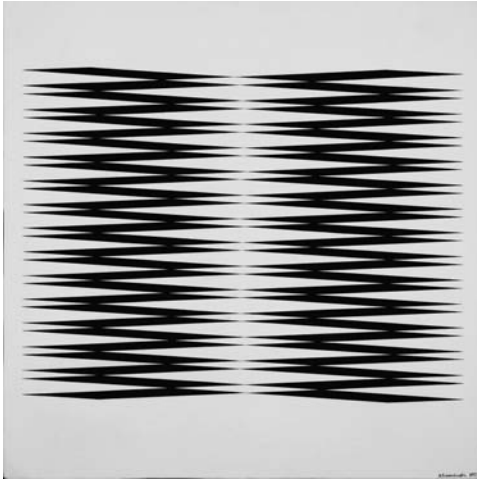
Concretist color supported the overall sense of the work-message as an essentially rhythmic structure. The autonomy of color was intolerable to Concretist orthodoxy for good reason: Research into color itself was a subjectivist residue within a project of objective message production that could not assimilate ineffable elements within its economy (to draw from the logic of industrial reproduction). (According to orthodox Concretism, Vasarely himself would be considered an inconsequential decorative artist.) Moreover, color would invite the spectator to approach the work in terms of immersive introspection, rendering its content little more than a quasi-psychological investigation.

The use of serial form and the temporal character of mechanical movement must likewise be understood as more than mere elements of the Concretist repertoire. These were procedures that directly informed the systems used by the artists. In the Neo-concretists' unanimous accusation, they came to function as a kind of compositional rule that substituted for deeper investigative processes. To begin, we need to explain why the Concretist program chose these procedures. It is probably quite simple: Serial forms, repeated in such a manner as to configure an abstract visual organization, were necessary so that discrete elements could be materially manipulated within the mathematical formalizations to which the Concretists aspired. It was no longer a matter of a *formal* art (form as means by which the work becomes the object of research for artistic intuition) but a *formalized* art constructed according to an objective model and reproducible by a technical process that would allow its creator's participation to disappear.

As we have seen, Concrete art emerged as a proposal for the radicalization of the constructive method at the heart of geometric languages, one more step in the effort to remove art from the realm of pure intuition. While it is incorrect to imagine a mechanical relation between Concrete art and mathematics, the constant



Waldemar Cordeiro. *Visible Idea*. 1957.
 Courtesy of the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo and the Waldemar Cordeiro Estate.



*Hermelindo Fiaminghi. Alternating 1. 1957.
Courtesy of the Pinacoteca do Estado de São
Paulo and Collection Hermelindo Fiaminghi.*

Brazilian Concrete art. An artwork is the result of a strict manipulation of its distinct elements organized according to a combinatory program. Even the Concrete attempt to introduce sensorial participation on the part of the spectator, which broke with the monopoly of the eye in art appreciation, was above all an informational demand. It did not possess the existential character of comparable experiments in Neo-concretism. Rather, it remained within the realm of communication processes and the limits of semiotic operations. It did not postulate phenomenological participation, neither did it appeal to a sensitivity that would be able to check aesthetic rationalism.

Concretist work remained an aesthetic message. It found fulfillment within aesthetics as historically constituted in the West, and its desire was to remain within these limits. The strength of this desire was such that it politically ignored the social insertion of art and limited itself to a common attempt within the constructive tradition to extend artistic practice to various sectors of industrial production. Against the despised Surrealism and Dadaism, against politically engaged artists, Concretism proposed the artist as visual informant, a superior designer submissive to the structures that governed aesthetic practice in bourgeois society. The actual results of Concretist production—its paintings, sculptures, and objects—were destined to produce effects within the strict limits of formal creation. Any potential impact from its insertion could only occur on this plane: the struggle for good form, for the democratization and rationalization of the environment. Of course, in some ways this represents a political insertion to the degree that all social acts are political. But what kind of politics? This is the question.

interest of the former in the latter is undeniable, not only as a model for resolving questions but also as the “ideology” at the foundation of the artists’ work. The same characteristic influence of Neoplasticism and the Cercle et Carré group and the same movement toward modernity through science and technology are found in Brazilian Concretism. The problem was how to adopt a positive and *modern* point of view that would participate in confronting the contemporary “progress” of “civilization.” The artist became the inventor of prototypes, a technician who could competently manipulate the data of visual information.

The desire to exclude any form of transcendence from the realm of the work of art defines

In Brazilian Concretist production we can easily perceive an anxiety about overcoming technological backwardness and the irrationalism caused by underdevelopment. This is why it reacted against regionalist realism, which was supported by the country's official Left in particular. This art consisted of a hodgepodge of archaic and folkloric references, extraordinarily diverse from a formal point of view, which were put to ideological use (recall, for example, the mixture of rustic and Renaissance traditions that characterized Mexican Muralism). Until the 1960s, the Brazilian constructive avant-garde was the most important alternative to the dominance of this regionalist tendency, which managed to seduce even a middle class little attuned to leftist politics.

An example of Concrete art's reductive schematization can be found in an analysis of its use of Gestalt theory. The laws of complementarity and the dynamics of figure and ground appear in most Concrete production in the form of exercises and optical games. There is a manipulation of Gestalt knowledge, but not transformation of that knowledge into a practice through which it might be surpassed. In this sense, it became an academic practice guided by rules and primarily concerned with the performance or simple demonstration of postulates. The relationship of the Concretist artists to Gestalt theory was didactic in character, an almost bookish apprenticeship.

The experiences and type of research developed by Concrete art ended in so-called op art, a detour to the Right within the Western constructive tradition. A more detailed analysis supports this argument and, to a point, signals the necessarily decorative and infantile direction that Concretist production would take were it to continue (Brazilian Concrete art ended up dissolving into several inconsistent movements, such as Waldemar Cordeiro's *pop-creto* and his experiments with computers).

Let us now consider what the sculptor Franz Weissmann made of these same theories. There is no doubt that he worked from an understanding of space intimately related to Gestalt. But what type of relationship was this? Perhaps one could call it libidinal, or at least experiential. Certainly, his work is far from illustrating a priori knowledge and draws its force of actualization (which produces the subject-spectator) from the experience of approaching space. In this sense, his work encompasses a wide range of possibilities. The interpretation of Weissmann's work—his "theorization of space," to use Clarival do Prado Valladares's term—occurs on various levels and requires the subject's participation, not only as a repository of knowledge but in terms of how desire engages a process of knowledge. It is not that we cannot conceptualize the work, but rather that it obliges us to a certain kind of formalization irreducible to scientific thought and common sense. Weissmann's system welcomes singularity, rather than merely tolerating it as a residue. Constructive tendencies typically considered singularity in art only in terms of idealist transcendence (just as Socialist Realism typically considered the specificity of a work of art to be a maneuver of bourgeois ideology). Even so, the project of Brazilian Concrete art tried to avoid the dangers of arid rationalism and the danger of what we might

call a solipsistic art that exhausts itself through aesthetic valuing of the sensitive and existential. This was what Waldemar Cordeiro called the turn to a “sensitive geometry,” the desire to aestheticize and impregnate reason and order with life. Perhaps this is not so far from the Neoplasticist desire to attain universal harmony by means of the comprehension of its laws.



*Franz Weissmann. Bridge. 1958.
Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts,
Houston, and Waltred Weissmann.*

This desire to aestheticize the rational order was also the basis of Swiss Concretism, which understandably managed to realize itself more successfully than the Brazilian version. Not, of course, in the social terms it proposed but in the works themselves. The reason for this is simple. For example, the type of rationalist lyricism that characterizes Max Bill's works (which are singular, although entirely Concrete) resulted from a day-to-day, almost natural familiarity with mathematical formalization and the constructive tradition. To a certain degree, in the case of Brazilian artists, adhesion to constructive tendencies was a messianic project that involved a series of efforts to overcome underdevelopment. It is in this respect that Mário Pedrosa spoke of the attempt to surmount the chaotic tendencies inherent to a tropical climate by turning to the strict and stabilizing rationalism of planning.

In this sense, there is nothing strange about the fact that Concretist production was marked by reductive schematization. To a certain degree, it was inevitable for a project of the constructive avant-garde in 1950s Brazil, at least in the initial stages of its affirmation within the cultural context. In the opinion of the Neo-concrete painter Aluísio Carvão, Concretism represented the orthodox phase of constructive penetra-

tion in the country, surpassed shortly afterwards by the open experimentalism of Neo-concretism. We should not forget that the Brazilian cultural environment was still dominated by traces of Romantic ideologies that superficially labeled Concretist work as rationalistic, cold, and uninspired.

To a certain extent, this reading of the visual production of Brazilian Concretism is poor and uninformative. Not simply because the movement failed to produce an artist of exceptional interest (Volpi, obviously, was not Concretist, or at least not merely a Concretist) but because of the very characteristics of its system. The experiments of Maurício Nogueira Lima, Luis Sacilloto, and Waldemar Cordeiro, among others, are limited by a dogmatic schematization. Clearly, this dogmatism does not correspond to the traditionalists' condemnation of it from their quasi-Romantic point of view. It is not "sterility," lack of lyricism, or rational methods of artistic production that render the Concretist work of little importance. There is nothing wrong in searching for a higher level of objectivity either in the processes of artistic production or in a rejection of prefabricated lyricism.

Perhaps it would be more correct to speak of reductionism. Leaving aside classical idealism, the practice of Concrete art was caught within the limits of a certain empiricism. By rejecting unconscious urges, for example, it ended up victimized by the rationality of the ego and a belief in the Cartesian subject. This was, without doubt, the root of the Neo-concretists' accusation that the Concretists destroyed subjectivity in the realm of art. The truth is that in its productive calculations, "singularities" occurred only as residues: This was probably what Gullar referred to when he accused the Concretists of São Paulo of being too far "removed" from the process of making art. The relation was "objectivist" and dealt, above all, with organizing data and objectifying it as a product.

The subject-artist in Concretism was shaped according to operational paradigms. Through the work, he searched for efficiency at a level that was also operational within the social environment at large. But the Concretist dilemma—and to a certain extent the dilemma of the entire constructive project—was that its efforts to break from the existing statute of art (based on the artwork's uselessness and sublimating effects) occurred within the very boundaries prescribed by those same rules: those of the aesthetic domain and the realm of rationality of the dominant production system itself. In this way, the propagation of Concretist dogmatism was a double-edged sword. At the same time that it projected the work of art outside the mythical limits to which it was confined, it situated the work far from critique and negation and inhibited the artist's desire to intervene in social discourse.

But it is equally easy to perceive that, despite its affirmation of modern values and its progressive refusal to adopt nationalist myths, Concretist production neglected the cultural discrepancies typical of underdevelopment. It appeared to ignore the true social conditions from which it emerged, and spoke less to broader Brazilian cultural reality than to the affectations and pretensions of an avant-garde group of the middle class. Despite the important re-adoption of Oswald de Andrade and his theory of anthropophagy,⁸ and despite the proposal to create an

8. Brito refers here to the modernist poet Oswald de Andrade's famous "Manifesto Antropófago" of 1928, which articulated Brazilian identity in terms of its cannibalization of outside influences.

“industrial baroque” that would respond to the specific conditions of Brazilian reality, Concretism was unable to systematically examine the political reason for its practice and justify its insertion within the Brazilian cultural environment. Repeating, to a certain degree, all the other national cultural and artistic movements before it, Concretism was only interested in importing a model and adapting it to local conditions, not questioning it in a properly critical mode. Once again, an avant-garde within artistic development did not signify a break from the circle of ignorance and depoliticization in which class positions paralyze cultural agents. Once again, dominant idealism prevailed over materialist cultural action.

If we accept that the common characteristic of the constructive tendencies was their idealism (reformism) and rejection of class struggles, then Brazilian (and Argentinean) Concretism took these tendencies to their furthest limits. Seen through contemporary eyes, these movements seem ridiculous in their grotesque submission to dominant social standards, the fetishization of technology, and the naive project of overcoming underdevelopment. There is something “colonial” in their mimicry of Swiss formalist rationalism. It was not by accident, of course, that they chose as their paradigm a rarefied and paradoxically delirious Germanic rationalism. We can note here a desire to ascend to the social reality of developed capitalism in such countries, and to the very theories that were designed to preserve that situation at all costs. The constructive vanguards in Latin America respond to this ambiguous desire: to join the developed world in order to emancipate themselves from that same world. There is a certain infantilism in this position, a neurotic desire for revenge: to attain the power of the father in order to immediately reject him.

The visual production of Brazilian Concretism suffered from the consequences of a didacticism that restricted the artist’s ability to maneuver within anything but a predetermined plan. One might say that the work was a result, not a process. This, of course, does not detract from interest in a more detailed analysis of this production as part of the efforts by middle-class Brazilian intellectuals to modernize culturally. What is more, it illustrates how Brazilian cultural movements revolved around a certain European positivist rationalism and its dream of social organization.

An analysis of the Brazilian Concrete movement (and not only of its visual production, as we have suggested above) can only be accomplished productively when situated in a broader field. Within this field, the penetration and development of constructive ideologies in Brazil was perhaps the only *organized* cultural strategy, especially through the 1950s, to oppose the nationalist, intuitive, and populist currents that culminated in the C.P.C. (Centro Popular de Cultura).⁹ In this broader sense, Concretism and Neo-concretism form a pair, inseparable in their responses to certain sectors pertaining to the social and cultural development of the country. It is not possible to dismiss them by labeling them an “aristocratic avant-garde” nor, obviously, to accuse them of being politically alienated.

9. The C.P.C., or Centers for Popular Culture, was a network of leftist cultural organizations that sought to use popular art to politicize the working class in the early 1960s. After his split with Neo-concretism, Ferreira Gullar became affiliated with the C.P.C. and renounced avant-garde art.

As a cultural response, the Brazilian constructive avant-garde brought together not only educated liberals and cosmopolitans but also dissidents of the dominant leftist cultural project, such as Mário Pedrosa. If Concretism had a naive and capitalist belief in technology and tended toward a technocratic view of culture, and if Neo-concretism was politically opaque and operated within the established limits of artistic practice in society without a critical view of its social insertion, it would still be incorrect to consider either of them reactionary. Of course, both were politically inscribed within the Brazilian cultural environment, an analysis of which would be very complex. This study is only a small part of a broader theoretical investigation.

The constructive ideologies are organically connected to Latin America's cultural development during the period from 1940 to 1960. They fit perfectly within the continent's project of reform and acceleration and, to a certain extent, served as agents for national liberation in the face of European cultural dominance (even as they simultaneously signified an inevitable dependence upon it). The obvious question is this: In what way could the constructive ideologies serve to culturally emancipate such countries in the face of their colonial traditions? One possible answer relates to how the typical constructive aspiration to plan a social environment along the lines of modernizing rationality entered into systemic conflict with the colonized mentality of the time. Even if this modernization was basically capitalist in nature, it implicated the formation of a national intelligentsia able to formulate appropriate solutions to local realities.

The relative anti-colonialism promoted by the agents of the constructive tendencies occurred at the level of cultural and technical know-how, outside the field of politics proper. Faced with the obvious limitations of the nationalist proposal, the constructive agents were only able to act by abdicating from politics and placing it, in the Concretist case, in the neutral realms of *culture* and *economy* or, in the Neo-concrete case, in the neutral realms of *culture* and *philosophy*.

A study of the effects of the penetration of the constructive ideology in the Brazilian cultural environment, the residues that even today influence this environment, its practical accomplishments, and the theoretical issues it raised, is beyond the limits of this essay. However, an analysis of the visual work of the Neo-concrete movement is an integral part of this study, and it is our belief that it is only this field of practice that merits theoretical and historical attention.

Neo-concrete Rupture

Our thesis is that Neo-concretism simultaneously represented the apex of the constructive consciousness in Brazil and its explosion. It is a complex object of study for the following reasons: Within Neo-concretism lie the most sophisticated elements imputed to the constructive tradition, as well as a critique and implicit recognition of the impossibility of this tradition's validation as a project of the Brazilian cultural vanguard. It is a historical fact that Neo-concretism was the last



Third Neo-concrete Exhibition. *Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo*. 1961.
 Courtesy of Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo.
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movement of the constructive tendency in Brazilian visual arts, and inevitably closed the cycle. With it, the Brazilian “constructive dream” as an organized cultural strategy was terminated.

As a sequential development of the Concretist movement and the penetration of constructive aesthetics more generally, Neo-concretism moved with ease in its field of action. Formed by upper-middle-class artists generally detached from market pressures and, to a certain extent, isolated by operating within a culturally disadvantaged environment, Neo-concretism was above all a series of laboratory experiments. The local history of the constructive experience provided them with sufficient confidence to raise the most advanced and productive issues of rupture of the time. It is clearly the second movement of a synchrony; this perhaps accounts for its greater freedom in relation to its origins (Swiss Concretism and the Ulm School, for example) and its search for a more specific national production. Writ large: Concretism would be the dogmatic phase and Neo-concretism the phase of rupture; Concretism the phase of implementation and Neo-concretism the shock of local adaptation.

The central points of the Concretism–Neo-concretism controversy revolved around language (visual and literary). In a certain way, Neo-concretism displaced the axis of Concretist concerns from Anglo-Saxon semiotics (Pierce) and information theory (Norbert Wiener) to more speculative philosophy (Merleau-Ponty and

Susanne Langer). Without completely abandoning Concretist postulates, it went beyond the rigorous manipulation of discrete elements in order to once again place ontological questions at the center of the theorizing of language. As Frederico Morais noted, Neo-concretism recovered humanism in the face of Concretist scientism.

In terms of visual language, the Neo-concrete critique of Concrete production was analogous to that formulated by Merleau-Ponty against Gestalt theory in the realm of philosophy. Given its extreme philosophical limitations, Concretism did not succeed in extracting all of its conceptual consequences from its own scientific discoveries. It made poor, limited, anecdotal, and even dogmatic use of them.

One can situate some of the main theoretical differences (and perhaps more as concerns intellectual formation) between Concretist and Neo-concrete agents through Merleau-Ponty's critiques of *realism* and *causalism* in discussions on behavioral psychology and Gestalt theory. In this sense, a passage from *La structure du comportement* is extremely enlightening:

It is the soul which sees and not the brain; it is by means of the perceived world and its proper structures that one can explain the spatial value assigned to a point of the visual field in each particular case. The coordinate axes of the phenomenal field, the direction which at each moment receives the value of "vertical" or "horizontal" and "frontal" or "lateral," the ensembles to which are assigned the index "immobile" and with respect to which the remainder of the field appears "in movement," the colored stimuli which are seen as "neutral" and determine the distribution of the apparent colors in the rest of the field, and the contexts of our spatial and chromatic perception—none of these result as effects from an intersection of mechanical actions; they are not a function of certain physical variables. Gestalt theory believed that a causal explanation, and even a physical one, remained possible on the condition that one recognized processes of structuration in physics in addition to mechanical actions.

But, as we have seen, physical laws do not furnish an explanation *of* the structures, they represent an explanation *within* the structures. They express the least integrated structures, those in which the simple relations of function to variable can be established. They are already becoming inadequate in the "acausal" domain of modern physics. In the functioning of the organism, the structuration is constituted according to new dimensions—the typical activity of the species or the individual—and the preferred forms of action and perception can be treated even less as the summative effect of partial interactions.¹⁰

10. Brito cited this passage in the original French. Here we have used the translation by Alden Fisher in Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), pp. 192–93.

Neo-concretism makes a similar critique of mechanistic thought in art and likewise exhibits a concern with “open” procedures of contemporary science (for example, its speculations about non-Euclidean geometries and, more precisely, Lygia Clark’s and Lygia Pape’s attraction to the Möbius strip). Within the Neo-concrete approach to the field of perception and the type of fruition that it prescribed for the work of art, the pure data of Gestalt was risible. To a certain extent, it returned to that imponderable element of expression, something that could not be determined by the strict manipulation of visual information.

For Gullar, as for Merleau-Ponty, the theoretical principles that guided anti-Concrete maneuvers were derived not only from phenomenology but from a certain existentialism. While the Concrete *episteme* treated mankind above all as a social and economic agent (despite the proclaimed autonomy of culture), Neo-concretism restored man to his place as a being in the world and proposed to think of art in the context of this totality. This signified a return of expressive intentions to the center of the work of art. It salvaged the traditional notion of subjectivity against the Concrete privileging of objectivity.

It seems clear today that in the face of technicalist reductionism, the Neo-concrete group found a “humanist” escape along two broad vectors. For those who aspired to represent the highest point of the constructive tradition in Brazil (Willys de Castro, Franz Weissmann, Hércules Barsotti, Aluísio Carvão, and, to a certain extent, Amílcar de Castro), humanism took the form of a *sensitization* of the work of art and signified an effort to conserve its specificity (even its “aura”), and to provide qualitative information for industrial production. For the other group, which consciously or not tried to break away from the constructive postulates (Oiticica, Clark, Lygia Pape), there was, above all, a *dramatization* of the work of art, an actualization in the sense of transforming its functions and reason for being, thereby challenging the existing rules of art. Of course, both were critical of Concretist empiricism (manifest in the movement’s theoreticism and inability to give up a mechanical idea of art production) and especially resisted the loss of the work’s specificity (and “aura”).

Yet if the Neo-concretists tried to escape Concretist reductionism through *sensitization* and *dramatization*, thereby fighting the sterilization of geometric language, these concepts are insufficient to explain the Neo-concrete dissidence within the Brazilian context. In some way, we can assume that there was a difference in the way these two movements inscribed themselves in the environment and projected their ideas into reality. We need to study to what degree the “politics” of these two movements, restrained as they were to the same repertoire of initial references in the constructive tradition, differ. To what degree did their productions have distinct effects, raise distinct issues, and follow distinct new paths?

The close ties between the Brazilian developmentalist project and the penetration of the constructive tendencies are beyond question. In this sense, Concretism and Neo-concretism were part of the same cultural strategy. And yet they did not form a cohesive unit, and the fact that they formally opposed each

other reveals the differing possibilities toward which each was directed.

Concretism, for example, attempted to intervene directly in the center of industrial production and strove explicitly to continue the “Swiss dream” of transforming the contemporary social environment. It was eagerly receptive to the cultural transformations of mass media. As already mentioned, Concretism joined the effort to overcome underdevelopment and directly attacked the archaisms of traditional humanist power within the Brazilian cultural sphere. It was entirely mobilized by the project of establishing a progressive dynamism within the country’s cultural field. Concretism’s notion of culture was diametrically opposed to that of the dominant academic mentality and its conception of the cultural field as a realm of immutable spiritual truths.

But we must note that although the Concretists quoted Marx and Engels, there is no doubt that they were far from Walter Benjamin’s insistence on politicizing art. Their actual theory of production, as well as the conceptual limits of their approach to reality, can be found in positivist rationalism, in the progressive pragmatism of Wiener and his cybernetic conceptions of social relations, in the formalism of Bill and Maldonado and their ideas on contemporary civilization. The Concretists were much closer to an *aestheticization of politics*. Their art searched for efficiency, especially in terms of mass information (as the creative matrix and method for investigating semiotic processes), and they believed in the antiquated value of this plan. The well-known manipulation of the mass media by the system, the necessary correlation between the ideologies of the dominant classes and the mass media, was not among the Concretists’ priorities.

Neo-concretism, by contrast, obeyed the system’s indications concerning cultural activity. It was practically apolitical; it maintained the protected status of art, and was timid and distrustful with regard to the participation of art in industrial production. Compared to agents of Concrete art, who were responsible for practical functions in their roles as advertisers and designers, the Neo-concrete artists were veritable amateurs. No matter how much they projected social transformations through art, they remained within a speculative realm of art as an



Lygia Clark. Planes in Modulated Surface No. 5. 1957. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and Associação Cultural “O Mundo de Lygia Clark.”

autonomous experimental practice. If we limit ourselves to the issue of artists' participation in social production, the Neo-concrete insertion occurred in a far narrower and more traditional space than that of Concretism.

In reality, this Neo-concrete difference, although circumstantial, was significant. At the very least, it indicated that for a group of constructive avant-garde artists working predominantly in Rio de Janeiro, there were no solid possibilities for exercising constructive postulates in a broader social arena. Given the level of aesthetics required by the movement, it simply ignored any project of the sort. Put this way, the process was more or less inverted: The very emergence of Neo-concretism within the contours through which it took shape resulted in this situation. Hence, a very Brazilian paradox characteristic of underdevelopment unfolded: a constructive avant-garde operating in the margins without any plan for social transformation.

This marginality or, better, this Neo-concrete laterality, is one of the movement's main characteristics. It was this that allowed for the explosion of the constructive postulates and led to a critique of the social statute of art itself, a critique that was systematically absent from the constructive movements. This marginality was also what hybridized the movement by "existentializing," and to a certain extent "de-rationalizing," geometric languages. That is why Max Bense defined the movement as "a group that distinguished itself from *Noigandres* because its Constructivism admits irrational elements alongside rational elements, as well as taking into consideration the country's folklore."¹¹

Neo-concretism acted in a historical setting in which knowledge was isolated from its political relations with the rest of society. Its exclusive reference points were art, science, and philosophy, and it called for a program consistent with this orientation. From the work of the Neo-concrete artists it is possible to extract an explicit position with regard to art history and philosophy and an implicit position with regard to science, but never to society as an arena of political confrontation. But the nonpolitical character of Neo-concretism's insertion has to be analyzed in the correct register, as it rigorously followed the apolitical stance common to the constructive tendencies more broadly. It was its necessarily lateral relation to a backward context that made Neo-concretism's cultural insertion so markedly aristocratic.

On the one hand, Neo-concretism benefited from the absence of market pressures, permitting artists to concentrate on the elaboration of works of art rather than the production of pieces. Let me make a distinction: By pieces, I mean a series of physical objects that strictly result from the same process, from the same infinitely repeatable mechanism. The dynamic of Neo-concretism was that of a laboratory, and this was only possible because of the absence of any confrontation with the market.

On the other hand, perhaps it is reasonable to speculate that Neo-concretism's apoliticism and even its idealism in the actions it took as a *movement* are partially related to its lack of systematic contact with the market. To the degree that it operated out of the market's reach, it did not suffer the market's alienating

11. Brito cites an undated text by Bense titled "Arte concreta semântica," translated by Haroldo de Campos.

action. It was not required to mechanically reproduce works, nor pressured to adapt its discoveries to existing formal schemas. There is no doubt, however, that the relationship with the market (which represents “the real” in artistic matters) is ultimately a politicizing one. It reveals the true position of the artist in society—the contradiction between the time and quality of his work as cultural production and the commercial circuit into which the resulting work is inserted. By escaping unscathed from the harsh reality of this contradiction, perhaps Neo-concretism was able to preserve a residue of idealism concerning the statute of art.

More or less free to continue their work without economic interferences, Neo-concrete agents related to each other more like “men of culture” than professionals submitting to a regime of competition. The exchange of information was fluid and occurred in an intimate context—some Neo-concrete artists felt (and still feel) proud of their marginality, of the idea of the artist as society’s “antennae” (Ezra Pound), a vanguard of processes of social transformation. The beginning of these processes of social transformation was the beginning of a process of rupture from the constructive tradition, a moment of crisis for this tradition in Brazil. Neo-concretism took up elements of the Romantic ideology of art (the increasing approximation of some of the movement’s artists to Dadaism is proof of this). The cult of marginality that is a component of this ideology is, by definition, alien to the constructive project.

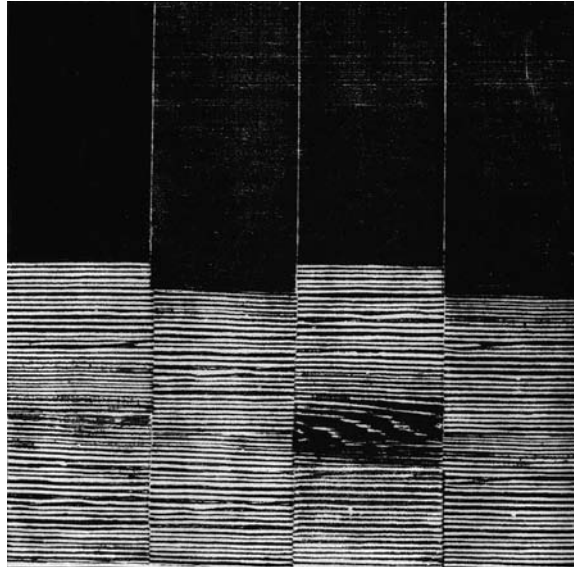
The Neo-concrete case was the result of a local crisis: the inability of Brazilian cultural agents to continue thinking exclusively within the constructive frame of reference. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, Neo-concretism was at the center of this crisis and represented the totality of operations that tried to either renew or surpass its frame of reference. From this point of view, we can establish two working hypotheses to guide our discussion of Neo-concretism:

1. As a continuation of the constructive penetration in Brazil, Neo-concretism was an attempt to renew geometric language in the face of its prevailing rationalistic and mechanistic character. More specifically, it was an attempt to *revitalize* constructive proposals in the strict sense of the word, placing emphasis on the experimental aspects of artistic practice. A unique feature of Neo-concretism, as a constructive movement, is that it favored the moment of the work’s conception to the detriment of its social insertion.
2. In spite of its well-known apolitical manifesto (and its liberal and at times latent anarchic-utopianism), Neo-concretism effected an important maneuver in relation to Brazilian art production in the sense that it wrested a broader autonomy from dominant cultural models. As the apex of a movement that began nearly ten years before, it acquired the awareness necessary to attempt to establish a distinct dynamic of artistic production. Neo-concretism determined—and this can be confirmed

by the current practice of contemporary artists in Rio de Janeiro—several decisive concepts regarding the significance of the art process in Brazil, and it provided an arsenal of critical operations by which art might be understood as an institution. In this, it oriented itself toward a contemporary local production distant from the constructive principles from which it was born.

Neo-concretism comprised the apex and rupture of the Brazilian constructive tradition (allow me to use this debatable expression). Its two basic impulses constituted a single common project: to reorganize the constructive postulates within the Brazilian cultural environment. The project was to renew the constructive avant-garde. As such, the Neo-concrete position would appear to be the most advanced and “freest” point of artistic research in Brazil. It is clear that it represented a local conquest with respect to the specificity of the work of art. The Neo-concrete work was neither submissive to the immediate political order nor a plan directly connected to the country’s developmentalist process. In this way, the Neo-concrete agents themselves determined the limits of their practice and resolved to analyze its elements in an autonomous manner. Instead of being instrumentalized, art could be understood as a comprehensive cultural activity that encompassed the whole of the human relationship to the environment.

Perhaps the Neo-concrete desire went beyond that at play in the constructive tendencies. Its humanist and idealistic retreat in the face of the Concretists’ more rigorous theoretical postulates can be analyzed as a refusal of empiricism and a dissatisfaction with the model of work implicit in them. The Concrete perceptive consciousness was too reductive for the Neo-concrete desire for an art with broader phenomenological intentions. Its Gestalt causality seemed too mechanical, almost Pavlovian, for artists who sought to work with complex articulations of higher behavior and speculated about a philosophy of form.



Lygia Pape. Untitled (from the “Weavings” series). 1959. Courtesy of Projeto Lygia Pape.

The difference in perspective between Concretism and Neo-concretism resulted from the clash between the empiricist notion of the work of art and its social and human meanings, and another connected to speculative idealism. In other words, between a type of positivism and a variation of classical idealism. It is obvious that these differences did not manifest themselves in this precise philosophical form but rather through an artistic controversy that rendered this general difference transparently clear. Let us take, for example, the debate central to these divergences: the question of whether the work of art was a *production* or a means of *expression*. A study of the maneuvers around this question is instructive.

There is no doubt that Concretism (and not self-proclaimed Marxist tendencies) deserves historical merit for comprehending the need to attack the stronghold of idealism at the center of art: the so-called creative process. The ideology of art widely accepted at the time was built around the mystification of this process. It maintained that it was impossible to reduce the work of art to rational data and veiled its capacity to function as intellectual work. The survival of the art market depends on the maintenance of this belief: “Creation,” and “creation” alone, can justify the commercial speculation undertaken by the market, guarantee its function to dispense status, and ensure the validity of a financial game capable of offering extraordinary returns. In the attempt to transform art into a more effective social instrument, Concretism seems to have understood that the displacement of its social function necessarily overcame the expressionistic conception of art. Against the notion of art as a means of expression, Concretism proposed it as a distinct production informed by objective knowledge and manipulated through inventive (and of course non-inspirational) methods.

However, Concretism did not radicalize its proposal. Instead of following a materialist theorization of art in order to approach art as a specific process of knowledge embedded in the ideological field, it stopped at a determined moment—the moment in which art was merely one of many means of information within a network of informational processes characteristic of the contemporary “environment.” At most, the social efficiency of art would be located in semiotic operations that catalyzed, particularly through the mass media, a mode of generating innovative effects and constituting something that might approximate a new collective aesthetic. Concretism conformed exactly to the constructive tradition within which it took shape, and remained confined to a naive belief in progress. This led it to consider the mass media as an instrument of cultural penetration consistent with the “spiritual needs” of modern man. The cost, evidently, was to ignore its character as an ideological device of the capitalist state.

The idea of an autonomous cultural field is at the heart of Concretist activity, practice, and theory, and this can only inhibit the development of a materialist perspective on art. Although the Concretists were interested in a different way of inserting the work of art into society, they could not completely escape from a typically bourgeois (idealistic) position with regard to the cultural field. Divorced from processes of ideological transformation, cultural activity can only be canon-

ized: It will always result in a sequence of individual inspirations, which in turn are transformed into contributions to the cultural heritage of mankind. Note the Concretist narrative of progression: Modern literature is the history of semiotic advances since Mallarmé, passing through Joyce and Pound and culminating in Concrete poetry. The so-called visual arts obey the same schema, only the names would be those of Mondrian and Max Bill.

It is therefore easy to perceive, in all its historical lucidity, that the “production” suggested by the theory of Concrete art is only production to a certain degree. On the one hand, it is too mechanistic in its project of social insertion, becoming confused with the inventive manipulation of advertising and aspiring to a suspicious functionality within the social whole. On the other hand, it reveals a prevailing idealism with respect to the mythical autonomy of an art history constructed in strokes of genius.

The Concretist interpretation of art and poetry is technicist. It arises from syntagmatic transformations within languages, but excludes the relations of these languages as institutionalized forms to the social field in which they operate (they always occur *within* recognized practices: Art, literature, and music are obviously not “natural” expressions). To the extent that Concretism ignored the local material of its insertion, its technicism ended up becoming a kind of idealism. This generated an apparent paradox: At the same time that the artists attempted to eradicate any semblance of the work of art’s ontological transcendence—substituting what Max Bense calls the old interpretative aesthetics linked to the “theme of being” for an “abstract and exact” aesthetics concerned with the material structuring of “information”—Concretism confined itself to the humanist contract between art and culture and the very circle that Western metaphysics had drawn around their manifestations.

Neo-concretism attacked *production* for other reasons. What it dreaded most was the danger of reductionism, of emptying art of its traditional humanist connotations while also neutralizing it as a distinct practice irreducible to common sense. Neo-concretism was born of the need by certain artists to remobilize geometric languages toward a more effective and “complete” engagement with the subject. Against what they presumed as the sterility of Concrete art (its limitation to a rigid exploration of serial forms and mechanical time and, ultimately, retinal experience), the Neo-concretists strove to transform the work into a range of complex relations in which the observer gradually became a participant. It was from here, naturally, that their effort to break from traditional categories of fine arts was born.

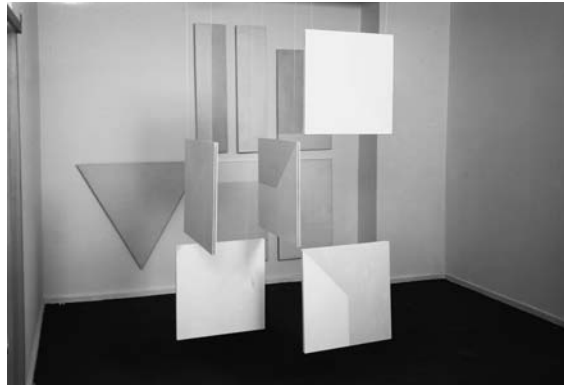
As one might guess, the term *production* seemed extremely impoverished for these artists. In a way, the term repressed the residual metaphysical whispers of art and indicated a type of rationalistic operation that appeared to exclude the libidinal involvement of the subject-artist. For the Neo-concretists, to speak of *production*, at least in the context of Concretism, was to limit the reach of the work of art’s realization to a narrow programmatic rationality. The preservation of the

term *expression*, reminiscent of traditional aesthetics, signified that the *difference* of the artistic process would be maintained. It was to safeguard the specificity of this process; in contrast to *mechanical forms*, the point was to manipulate *expressive forms* and transcend their physical properties.

As one can see, Neo-concretism flirted with the theory of perception (the Merleau-Ponty of *La structure du comportement* and Susanne Langer) and did so in a manner largely contaminated by idealism. It did so not only by deploying concepts such as expression or *organicity* as counterparts to Concretist rationalism and its scientific privileging of objectivity, but also in overt statements. In his article “From Concrete to Neo-concrete Art,” Gullar states: “The Neo-concretists reaffirm the artist’s creative possibilities independent of science and ideologies.”¹² If we think briefly of the 1950s in Brazil, we will note that there were practically no other routes: All the university debates were between the various schools of positivism and classical speculative philosophy, including existentialism. Marxism, the alternative to this debate, found itself in a peculiar situation. It was doubly fenced in: from the outside, by bourgeois ideologies; from the inside, by partisan agents who considered culture merely an aspect of party strategy, thereby simplifying or repressing issues that did not directly fit within it.

A self-proclaimed Marxist position rooted in the Brazilian cultural environment was hardly attractive to an aristocratic avant-garde such as Neo-concretism. Its range of questions was limited and its bases narrow. Art’s function was to *illustrate* the development of political and ideological conflicts, and *color* the so-called artistic values of the Brazilian people (values, of course, determined by the bourgeois consciousness of the elite that directed its organization). As we noted above, Neo-concretism was not interested in politicizing culture. Its desire was for an advanced position within the process of knowledge; its *revolution* was within the limits of art and “mankind.”

The use of the concept of *expression* indicates the degree to which classical idealism permeated the ideology of the Neo-concrete movement. But throughout its debate with Concretism, it was a positive factor—it signified that an open experimental space could be maintained against rationalist reductionism. It is from here that

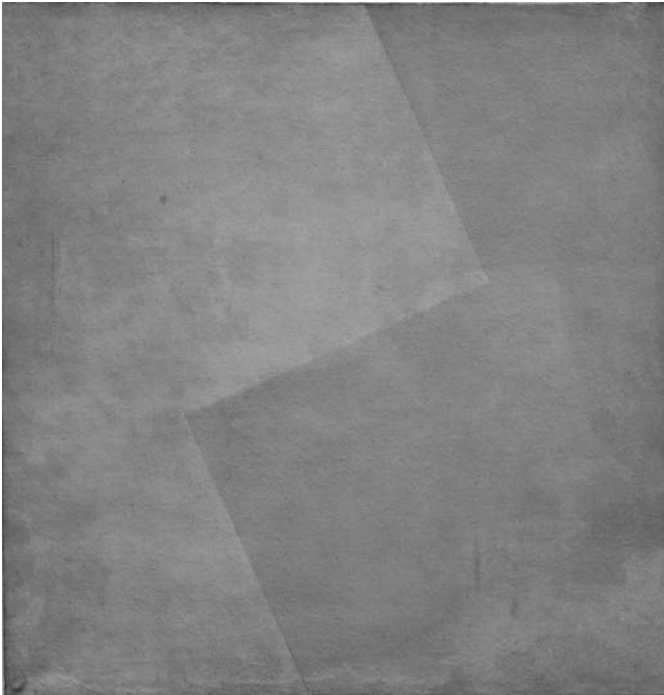


Hélio Oiticica. Bilateral Equali. 1960.
Courtesy of Projeto Hélio Oiticica.

12. Ferreira Gullar, “Da arte concreta à arte neoconcreta,” *Suplemento Dominical do Jornal do Brasil*, July 18, 1959, p. 3.

Neo-concretism established the limits of the constructive tendencies, insofar as it achieved a critical distance from these tendencies as they had reached Brazilian Concretism through the Ulm School. We will now briefly examine the effects of maintaining the traditional category of expression in Neo-concrete practice.

As I see it, this category affected decisively the type of relationship these artists had with constructive languages, languages that had by then already formalized into a tradition. It enabled a relative negation of these tendencies, principally their overwhelming concern with the positivist character of the work of art. By opting for expression, the Neo-concretists displaced themselves from the functionalist axis around which the constructive tendencies revolved. Yet by remaining within them, they maintained a certain laterality. This is evident in the group's very productions: in the "utopian" reliefs of Hélio Oiticica (speculative topological studies with no immediate practical application), in the schemas of tension and rupture produced by Amílcar de Castro, in the phenomenological organic and anti-positivist nature of Lygia Clark's "bichos," in the surgical exploration of an object's parts in Willys de Castro's "active objects," in the libidinal impregnation of spaces by Franz Weissmann. It is also evident in the research on color—a taboo element in Concrete work likely due to the impossibility its objective formalization—in works by Aluísio Carvão, Hélio Oiticica, and Hércules Barsotti.

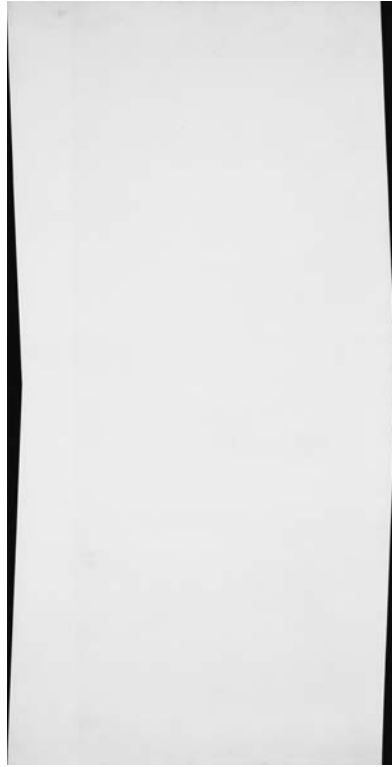


*Aluísio Carvão.
Chromatic. 1960.
Courtesy of Coleção
João Sattamini/
MAC-Niterói.*

In all of these works, there is something that refuses reduction to the simple scheme of a formal matrix. There is something that arises from what one could call a speculative process that refuses to tolerate the formulation of “superior design” proposed by Concretism. They are productions by “artists” engendered from singular formalizations irreducible to the objectivity of formulas and mathematical series. The critical question for Neo-concretism was to experientially impregnate geometric languages, re-propose them as expressive manifestations, put them forward once again as objects of phenomenological complexity, and transform even their ontological significance. According to Gullar: “The Neo-concrete attitude does not begin from the a priori existence of the constitutive elements of expression, but implies a plunge into the very source of experience from whence the work of art will spring, impregnated with nonethical, emotive, and existential meaning.”¹³

At this point it is important to situate and study the *problems* that Neo-concretism raised and, more directly, the problems that oriented its practice within the visual field. One of the most relevant—the question of *production vs. expression*—has already been discussed. However, it was not the only one. The Neo-concrete project explicitly investigated other basic concepts. Let us examine them in turn.

The idea of time. The question of time was decisive for various constructive tendencies from the 1960s onwards. We can note the distinct perspectives of Op, kinetic, and Minimal art, for example. The first two insisted on a close connection between art and science by analogizing their dual processes of apprehension and, moreover, the terms of art’s participation within the contemporary technological environment. To this end, they invented productions that formalized data in a scientific manner. Traditionally, time was understood within art as a mere residue of metaphysical thought. The alternative was to think of time as *movement*, a real perceptive stimulus, a



Hércules Barsotti.
White/Black. 1959.
Courtesy of the Museum of
Fine Arts, Houston, and
Renata Secchi and Paula
Marques da Costa.

13. Gullar, “Da arte concreta à arte neoconcreta,” p. 3.

concrete element in the visual repertory. As a counter-proposal to the traditional notion of time as “interior,” immobile, and aspiring to eternity, the scientific wing of the constructive tendencies (Concretism, Op, and kinetic) favored mechanical movement. As such, they opened the door to directly engaging electronic technology within the production of works of art. Concrete art since Max Bill marked a pronounced turn to technology within several of these 1960s tendencies and the point of departure for their scientific and developmentalist ideology.

It is in this sense that Neo-concretism (and, later, Minimal art) effected a rupture within the sequence of constructive development. Its lack of interest in technology as an intrinsic factor of production, its insistence on the idea of virtual time, its refusal to constrain form within purely optical-perceptive limits, questioned several fundamental principles of this tradition. It is no accident that Neo-concretism, Minimalism, and certain independent Latin American artists such as [Jesús Rafael] Soto and Sérgio Camargo not only were the last significant protagonists of constructive theories but acted on the margins of this tradition.

In Neo-concretism, time takes a quite unorthodox constructive form. Against the Concretist idea of time as mechanical movement, it offered up time as *duration* and virtuality. Speaking of the differences between Concrete poetry and Neo-concrete poetry, Gullar put it this way: “For the São Paulo poets, the time expressed by the poem must be relational, mechanical. In this manner, the page becomes an objective graphic space within which visual vibrations have a predominant role. The poem is an object, a special body that simply feeds on the automatic patterns that its forms force the eye to see. It should be clear that when the Concrete-rationalist poets speak of space-time, they are not referring to the organic, nonobjective space-time that occurs in phenomenological perception: they are referring to objective concepts, to science, where this synthesis occurs a posteriori. So much so that the *paulista* Concrete poems contain time as a function, as an exterior relation of the poem’s parts. It is a time that imitates mechanical movements.”¹⁴

Theon Spanudis declared that the Neo-concrete poem “is the actual time of poetic experience materializing in living space” (quoted by Gullar in the above-mentioned article). As we can clearly see, we have returned to the controversy between positivist rationalism and phenomenological idealism around which the Concrete and Neo-concrete positions were constructed. It is important to remember, however, that it was almost scandalous to introduce Bergson—with his intuitive doctrine and idea of time as *duration*—into the field of a movement committed to a constructive interpretation of post-Cubist art. Yet in some crucial way, it was pertinent to the Neo-concrete project: It facilitated the proposal to “activate” the relationship between the subject and the work, and permitted multiple possibilities for interpreting the “openness” of time. Lygia Pape’s prints and Amílcar de Castro’s sculptures, for example, worked with time as virtuality. They approached it as a means of suspending the “time” of production so as to allow for the intervention of the spectator, in the sense

14. Gullar, “Da arte concreta à arte neoconcreta,” p. 3.

of completing works, recreating them, interpreting them each time in a distinct way, and in this manner experiencing the various moments of its production. It was, without a doubt, the beginning of a process that led some Neo-concrete artists to radicalize the participation of the *other*, toward what Oiticica called “*vivências*.”¹⁵

As an attack on the “eternity” implicit in the traditional work of art, the time activated by Neo-concretism was fundamentally different from that activated by Concretism. Neo-concretism did not attempt to establish a real dynamic between the movements of the work itself and the perceptual maneuvers of interpretation. It situated itself on a far more abstract and mediated plane (in a sense, Concrete art is an empiricism of form). Neo-concretism attempted to mobilize a discontinuous process of interpretation that would provoke an integral involvement on the part of the observer. It prescribed a *dramatic*, existential reading, hence its desire to *sensitize* and even polemicize geometry. Here once again is proof that Neo-concretism did not think of the work as an informational process, but rather as a proposition for “experiences.” Concrete time is operational; it has an objective dimension. Neo-concrete time is phenomenological, a recuperation and recharging of lived experiences. It is in this sense that Neo-concretism was a precursor to the dominant tendencies in the 1960s, which represented an effort to abolish the distance between art and life.

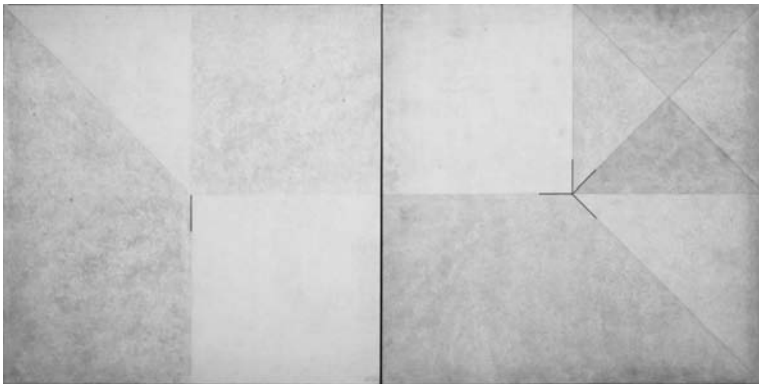
Neo-concrete space. Perhaps it would be more correct to use the term *field*, given its active, radiating character. With regard to space, the Neo-concrete agents were emphatic; they vehemently criticized the continuation of a *figure-ground* scheme—the basis of pre-Cubist representational space—and threw themselves into the task of its total, nonmetaphoric mobilization. There are several approaches to active space within Neo-concretism, but they essentially revolve around a phenomenological conception and, as a result of this, the unanimous refusal of a strictly Gestalt-driven perception. These approaches include speculations on non-Euclidean geometries (Pape, Clark, Amílcar de Castro), the discontinuous treatment of surface (Willys de Castro, Carvão), and the attempt to breach the distance between the space of the work (Clark’s “bichos” and her theories of the *organic line*). The Neo-concrete artist did not approach space, properly speaking; he or she experimented with it. Neo-concrete artists gave themselves over to living it, acting against the traditional relationship between the subject-observer and the work. They had a noninstrumental notion of space, a wish to magnetize it, to render it a field of projection and engagement within an almost erotic register. The Neo-concrete desire was opposed to the existing mode of relation between art and the process of its reception. Against passivity, conventionalism, and the Platonism of “normal” enjoyment, Neo-concretism pressurized this relation, exploding its traditional limits. Perhaps it would not be ridiculous to detect a Nietzschean orientation in Neo-concretism (after all, both Gullar in *A Luta Corporal* and Oiticica’s well-known familial origins are close to Nietzsche),¹⁶ one that would certainly be quite exotic to constructive rationalism.

15. *Vivências* can be loosely translated as “experiences” or “life experiences.”

16. *A Luta Corporal*, Gullar’s 1954 book of poems, was premised on the disintegration of words and conventional syntax. Oiticica’s grandfather was José Oiticica, a philologist, anarchist, and author of *A doutrina anarquista ao alcance de todos* (1925).

The rupture with representational (metaphorical, allusive) space meant a break with the established rules of art, freeing the artist, to a certain extent, to act more directly within the social field. In other words, this was an act of rupture that was cognizant of its implications in social discourse and no longer respected the mythical circle within which dominant ideology tried to confine the work of art. This was Neo-concretism's radicalism: to oppose the established system of art and its dominant conventions through experimentalism. This was achieved practically and not only theoretically. It was anchored in the reality of the Brazilian cultural environment and it was there that its actions had effects. In a certain manner, the movement liquidated the pretensions of any constructive cultural project *organized* for Brazil, at the same time that it left traces of a systemically critical and libertarian attitude within the narrow limits in which artistic practice had been carried out in the country.

In this sense, Neo-concretism generated critical and material effects incomparably more important than those of Concretism, which ultimately submitted to the orthodox constructive model. This was Neo-concretism's materialism: It introduced the concept of critical *intervention* in the circuit of Brazilian art through a practice that always pushed at the limits of the constructive project, ultimately revealing the inability of that project to insert itself within Brazilian reality. What the Concretists and Max Bense considered to be Neo-concrete *irrationalism* was, in fact, simply the margin that escaped *their* rationalism and held it in check. There was an implicit refusal in this Concretist attitude to functionally integrate art within the collective or to think of *art-function*, to discuss its effects beyond a closed art history. This is why Neo-concretism inaugurated the foundations of contemporary art in Brazil. In broad strokes, it is possible to define contemporary art as that which refuses to believe in its mythical autonomy within the broader social field



*Décio Vieira. Untitled. 1950s.
Courtesy of Coleção João Sattamini
and Monica Holzheister Pinho.*

and decides to investigate the actual location where it emerges and functions. Although apolitical, Neo-concretism contributed more than any other movement in the field of visual production to politicize art in Brazil by virtue of the mechanisms it activated and by the effects of its undogmatic, critical practice.

Neo-concrete space surpassed the limits of constructive space and ended up establishing itself as a polemical field within the circuit of Brazilian art in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The issue of subjectivity in art. This is one of the most persistent points of controversy between Concretism and Neo-concretism. The latter insisted on the subjective character of the work of art, contradicting the Concretist project to objectify production to its maximum, to separate art from the category of expression. We have already seen the way artists navigated between the idea of art as production and as expression. Let us now analyze the question of subjectivity and objectivity in another register.

We should recognize from the outset that the Neo-concrete defense of subjectivity was not immune to idealistic commitments, or, more precisely, to residues of the humanist existentialism that permeated French phenomenology. We recall once again how Concretism's cult of the mechanical and consequent reductionism led its artists to think of art as inventive technical manipulation, the activity of a centered subject of knowledge dealing with informational flows. With this in mind, it is possible to situate the debate.

Of course, Neo-concretism was not interested in returning to traditional subjectivism and the "quasi-romantic" ideology that dominated prevailing conceptions of art, even as it explicitly accepted the basic postulates of the constructive avant-garde. Logically, not even Concretism was interested in excluding the individual, since ultimately the constructive project respected the limits within which contemporary capitalist society inscribed the concept of *individuality*. This respect for the individual can be demonstrated by Concretism's didactic concerns, by its belief that training *designers* who would efficiently intervene in the complex informational network could transform civilization. The differences with regard to objectivity within the internal debate of Concretism–Neo-concretism are subtler. They occur as variations in the constructive interpretation of reality; they are symptoms of a divergence in relation to cultural strategy.

Concretist objectivity was a response to psychologism in art; it was a mode of entering processes of social communication that were the nucleus of desired action for the new designer. It aspired to turn art into an objective social factor, something that could aid in transforming the "environment." In relation to the force of this positivity, subjectivity was a residue. In poetry, it was manifested in nostalgia and sentimental lyricism, and in art through the metaphysics of color and pure forms. One cannot argue that Concretism approached the work of art merely through methodical application, or as rigid, quasi-scientific formalization of perceptual data. As we have seen, there is the question of inventiveness in

manipulation, even an attempt to “sensitize” geometry. But its program privileged the objective insertion of the work of art over subjective involvement. It approached art primarily as a process of social information rather than a means of research. It simultaneously abolished the speculative and idealistic character of production and deployed an authoritarian reductionism to the core of art. In this situation, singularities were rejected as elements that could not be formalized.

Concretist empiricism was only able to objectify artistic practice by way of an authoritarian maneuver. It was not able to launch a successful artist or theorize about the objective results of its practice without jeopardizing its own specificity. Finally, it did not pursue the objectivity of the work of art because it never came close to clearly conceiving the ideological field in which this work was necessarily inserted. Hence, its apparent radicalism became a type of sectarianism or, as was said at the time, dogmatism. It remained embedded in the myth of art, displacing only its function. Art was no longer concerned with the eschatological, the phantasmagorical, in short, the spiritual; instead, it came to act as an informational agent, a promoter and objectifier of informational processes, even as it retained all the privileges of ideological exemption. The condition of the subject’s existence—its truth as an *effect produced by the system*—was never raised, even though subjectivity was questioned from a grossly positivist viewpoint concerning the social performance of art (it was a position typical of nineteenth-century rationalism).

Neo-concretism also did not understand subjectivity as an effect produced by the system. On the contrary, it held on to the ontological values of the subject, values traditionally emphasized by art. Neo-concretism was more humanist and less technicalist than Concretism and insisted on considering the work of art as a mythical totality engendered by a privileged subject, the artist. Neo-concretism was born out of the efforts of a group of constructive artists to reassume repressed singularities in order to produce an experiential art open to the observer’s active participation. It was a reaction to Concretist authoritarianism and reductionism as well as an affirmation of the value of art.

These artists comprehended that research in art necessarily included singularities. Indeed, the challenge was precisely to formalize them. The great *difference* Neo-concretism made in relation to Concrete art resulted from this fact. The central problem of the latter was the linear *intentionality* and rigid *objectivism* to which it appealed; it nearly always presented itself as a product to be interpreted and calculated according to the most obvious programmatic rationality. Its weapon against excessive metaphysical content was the aesthetics of the game (not in the Nietzschean sense, of course), realized exclusively in more or less complex combinations on the optical plane. In other words, Concretism’s mobilization of the subject-observer confined itself to the conscious center (or, more simply, the ego) of the psyche. At the level of desire, to use a jargon dear to the Concretists, the message presented a low intensity of information.

The Neo-concrete efforts developed toward a broader and more explosive mobilization. Not only did production itself (for the artists, the *act of expression*)

involve the subject much more dramatically, but its enjoyment was also prescribed in emotional terms. We can say that the proposal was to activate an intense circulation of the observer's (or participant's) desire; this is why it entailed a fight to break with the conventional relationship between the work and the spectator. As a constructive tendency (a Brazilian one, it is true, and on the brink of rupture, but nonetheless constructive), Neo-concretism was an exception in that it escaped defining the subject in terms of clear rationality. Without doubt, the type of phenomenological participation to which it aspired was far from rational. In the same way that Merleau-Ponty tried to extract philosophical consequences from Gestalt theory in a manner that would have contradicted the very ideas of its authors, Neo-concretism appears to have reoriented constructive postulates in a direction its initial creators could not have anticipated.

Neo-concretism's ethical concerns and its attempt to reestablish the problem of *being* at the heart of artistic activity diverted it from the positivism characteristic of the constructive tendencies and their mechanistic conception of the human psyche. But the *subjectivity* salvaged by Neo-concretism should not be confused with that of traditional psychology, of which it remains only a partial heir. It signified, above all, a polemical position in the midst of a debate and served to emphasize the conceptual aspects of the work of art—that is, aspects beyond its ethical-perceptual data.

The rupture of traditional categories in the fine arts. It is obvious that, in part, this rupture began with modern art itself. Here we will speak more precisely about the Neo-concrete desire to redefine the art-operation in terms of its relationship with the spectator. This desire appears to exceed the constructive project of environmental planning, with the necessary interpenetration of the categories of painting and sculpture as part of a larger architectural integration. With few exceptions, such as Tatlin's counter-reliefs, constructive productions were not, nor did they try to be, transformative devices in terms of artistic relationships. The particular means of accomplishing this transformation was the functional integration of the work of art into architecture. In this sense, the work itself posed no great challenge in that it remained to a large degree within a traditional realm of formal study. In this regard, Duchamp and the Dadaists were much more radical; they acted more explicitly to transgress art's norms.

One of Neo-concretism's principal characteristics was its systematically critical position toward the contemporary foundations, mechanisms, and ideologies of art. Herein lies its anti-formalism. An analysis of Neo-concrete production reveals, above all, the presence of a unified critical intelligence applied to contemporary methods of formal organization. It is here that one can speak of a Neo-concrete *imagination*, perhaps in opposition to a Concrete *inventiveness*. There is a *negational* will and, let us say, a *utopian* impulse in Lygia Clark's "bichos," in Oiticica's reliefs and "non-objects," in Willys de Castro's "active objects," in Lygia Pape's *Book of Creation* and *Neoconcrete Ballet*, in Amílcar de Castro's sculptures, etc.



Clark. Critter (Machine). 1962.
 Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and
 Associação Cultural "O Mundo de Lygia Clark."

example, tolerate Neo-concretism's detachment from the programmatic rationalism of the orthodox constructive tendencies. Nor could it tolerate the Neo-concrete desire to disrupt the preestablished clarity of construction, the logic of compositional harmonies, the prudent manipulation of constructive foundations. In Neo-concretism there is violence, a margin for accepting chance, an experimentalist empiricism; in short, an opening to *excess* that did not fit within constructive canons. Something there went beyond the limits of the rationality and inventiveness of the constructive tradition.

This "something" manifested itself in the process the Neo-concretists undertook in order to break with the traditional categorizations of art. Leaving aside the fusion of word and image (which is beyond the limits of this study), it is possible to verify this rupture within visual production.



Oiticica. Spatial Relief (Red). 1959.
 Courtesy of Projeto Hélio Oiticica.

This *negational* will, inscribed principally in the task of breaking away from the dominant formal order and the contemporary mode of relationship between the work and spectator, marked Neo-concretism and placed it in the paradoxical position of a more or less "accused" constructive movement. This relatively "accused" character derived in part from the blustery attitude its agents took with regard to the linear and rational constructive tradition. Even considering that Brazilian Concretism was probably much more aggressive than its Swiss counterpart, it was so only to a point. It could not, for

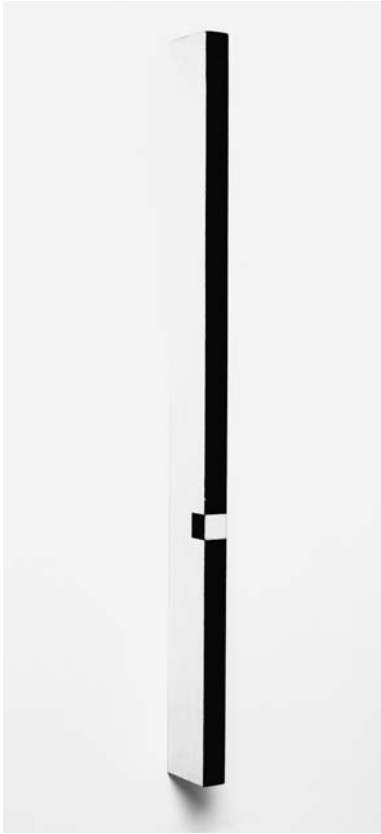
Let us examine the field of sculpture, for example. Clark's concern with the suppression of the base—the support that isolates the piece from the space surrounding it, privileging the work while Platonizing its relationship with the spectator—proves the existence of a critical attitude toward existing forms. With her "bichos" and reliefs, she searched for a different means of inserting the work of art into reality, a positivity doubtless alien to traditional constructive formulations. The phenomenological proposal of these

“bichos” represents an invitation to another kind of participation of artworks in human space. The mode by which such works insert themselves into reality indicates the type of complex, libidinal relations that they intended to establish with the observer, who is already transformed into an active entity released from passive contemplation.

In the same way, the reliefs of Hélio Oiticica work on an interior, virtual space, questioning the limits of our everyday visual perception, twisting our models of aesthetic experience. They are certainly constructed works, but they are born from a non-Cartesian logic and insist on formalization to an extreme. A careful analysis of this production might reveal not only its connection to the postulates of modern science—especially non-Euclidean geometry—but also an implicit idea about what constitutes the “social” and art’s insertion into this “social.” It is a “politics,” if we may use this expression. What we want to make clear is that, ultimately, the Neo-concrete wish to break away from the conventions of art has an ideological basis and is indicative of a critical position within the cultural field. If Concretism, following the constructive tradition, was characterized by its reformist social-democratic positions, apolitical Neo-concretism was nearer to a utopian and anarchic refusal of established reality. The point is not to establish who was further to the left or right, but to detect the ideological tendencies, the roots of which are part and parcel of the Brazilian cultural environment.

Even a practice as engaged with the constructive tradition as that of Willys de Castro is enlightening in this regard. His *active objects* are constructions, but “perverse” constructions. Their thematization of surface as a discontinuity impossible to approach as a totality already exceeds a constructive aesthetics that would aspire to the syntactical organization of visual information. The central point of interest in the Neo-concrete work is the mobilization of nonrepresentational space, but its mode of insertion into real space entails a certain *negativity*, something that surpasses the limits of function. The Neo-concretists insisted that this “something” was “expression” itself, the manifestation of subjectivity, a quantitatively undeterminable element. This “something” constitutes the Neo-concrete difference. We need not return to expressiveness to understand this difference in relation to the ludic rationalism of Concretist productions. The intensity of Neo-concrete production demonstrates its irreducibility to the simple combinatory maneuvers of Concrete art.

The intensity of the *active objects*, the fact that they not only exist but *insist*, indicates the type of desire with which they are charged. Their “perversity” lies in their refusal to be satisfied with relational or so-called objective data. It was not enough to structure elements into a formalization irreducible to a direct, totalizing gaze. The works invest an *intensity* in their structure, putting into play a circulation of desire that the Concretist system could not anticipate. In a general sense, this is Neo-concretism’s specificity. At the limits of constructive rationality, it not only “sensitized” geometric languages (as Cordeiro had proposed) but sought to revitalize them, *to pressurize them* as the foundation of a relationship that did not



Willys de Castro. Active Object.
Ca. 1960. Courtesy of the Museum
of Fine Arts, Houston, and Walter
de Castro.

limit itself to informational processes, but rather involved the subject and questioned subjectivity itself.

Neo-concretism could only approach this irrational, unformalizable dimension in terms of the *sublime*, that is, in the traditional realm of idealistic aesthetics. Now, however, it is necessary to theorize the subject and the position of Neo-concrete desire in relation to art and culture; we need to go further in this direction to understand and evaluate their effects on the Brazilian environment. As mentioned, these effects had the power to open up a space for contemporary production at the cost of surpassing the constructive project. Neo-concretism's decisive double operation was to question the existing categories and orders of art—which included, in some manner, those maintained by the constructive tradition itself—and to establish a political position for art far from populist and nationalist ideologies, and even from the constructive project of which Concretism was the principal vehicle.

In a more explicit manner, Neo-concretism reduced its influence to the Rio–São Paulo axis, especially to Rio de Janeiro. As is always the case with Brazilian cultural movements, it is nearly impossible to precisely formalize the points, extension, and levels at which these influences occurred. In contrast to powerful cultures that achieve continuity and build broad protective mechanisms around themselves, producing history and imprinting concepts on all of their manifesta-

tions, cultures with colonial origins are not strong enough to establish a dynamic of their own. They remain within the same environment from which they emerged, residual and fragmentary, and their inscription is left behind for future generations as a mere trace. Even at best, the Brazilian cultural production occurs, in the precise words of Oiticica, as *diarrhea*.¹⁷

17. Brito refers here to Oiticica's 1970 text "Brasil Diarréia," published in *Arte Brasileira Hoje*, ed. Ferreira Gullar (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1973), pp. 147–52.

It is in this setting that the effects of Neo-concretism necessarily lie. But let there be no doubt, it is as an intense residual action, decisive for a sector of contemporary production. It is even possible to situate it as a *cut*, a *point of rupture* from modern art in Brazil. After this, or rather with this, the foundations were laid for a production that Mário Pedrosa called postmodern art (to distinguish it from post-Impressionist and post-Cubist modern art).¹⁸ From the issues that it raised to its very manner of institutional insertion to the way it evolved as a group strategy, Neoconcretism signified a new and different type of research within the Brazilian cultural field of the late 1950s. The question that follows is whether one can attribute to these adjectives a substantial or merely circumstantial value. In other words, does the study of Neo-concretism represent important data for clarifying the Brazilian constructive project as an autonomous and alternative proposal, or is it merely an appendix to the confusing moments of its dissolution?

Of course, to a certain degree, Neo-concretism should always be studied as Concretism's equal in terms of the impact of constructive ideologies in Brazil. But it is important not to forget that Neo-concretism was a point of rupture within these ideologies. It should not be reduced to its aspect of continuity, repressing what perhaps was its main contribution: producing a *crisis* in the constructive project, a reflection on that crisis and on the impossibility of pursuing the constructive dream of a reformist utopia and an "aestheticization" of contemporary industrial means within the Brazilian cultural environment. Neo-concretism was initially confined to this scheme, without doubt. However, it manipulated and activated the very elements that escaped and announced its limitations: its formalism and aestheticism. More than the postulates of the constructive aesthetic, Neo-concretism broke away from the very statute that this conception established for the work of art and its social insertion. Implicitly, by surpassing the limits of the constructive project, it allowed for art's insertion into the ideological field, into the discursive field of culture as social production.

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Translated from the Portuguese by
Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro with Irene V. Small.

18. Brito's reference is to Mário Pedrosa, "Arte ambiental, arte pós-moderna, Hélio Oiticica," *Correio da Manhã* (Rio de Janeiro), June 26, 1966, in which the critic argued that Oiticica embodied a new, postmodern cycle of art, or, more properly, "anti-art." Translated in Ferreira and Herkenhoff, *Mário Pedrosa: Primary Documents*, pp. 314–17.