

Exit and Impasse

Ferreira Gullar and the ‘New History’ of the Last Avant-Garde

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Vanguardism is dead. All that's left is to bury it.

Ferreira Gullar¹

On 22 March 1959 the Brazilian poet and critic Ferreira Gullar published the ‘Manifesto Neoconcreto’ in the pages of the Sunday Supplement of the *Jornal do Brasil* on the occasion of the the ‘First Exhibition of Neoconcrete Art’ at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro. In an immediate sense Gullar’s manifesto was a polemic against Brazilian Concretism, a set of practices and theoretical positions concerning geometric abstraction and visual poetry that developed in São Paulo and Rio in the mid-1950s. On a broader level the document was a manifesto about interpretation and the generative function of historical re-evaluation for the creative process of artistic production. Like Concretism, Neoconcretism situated itself in relation to a legacy of formal innovation associated with the non-representational practices of pre-war European art. Neoconcretism did not simply claim elective affinities with such movements, however. As Gullar made clear, it posited itself as a nothing short of a historiographic intervention – a ‘taking of position’ in relation to previous avant-gardes.

The same week as the publication of the ‘Manifesto Neoconcreto’, Gullar began a series of articles in the art pages of the Sunday Supplement under the title ‘Stages of Contemporary Art’. This series, which continued in weekly instalments until October 1960, was intended to provide what Gullar called a new ‘orientation’ and ‘general vision of contemporary art’.² As he wrote:

Starting today, we will attempt a retrospective of the most important innovative movements, since Cubism... in the field of visual arts. We do not intend... an exhaustive survey, but a... modest introduction which will facilitate comprehension of what is being done today in the world, and

1. Ferreira Gullar, ‘Preface’ [1997], *Cultura Posta em Questão: Vanguarda e Subdesenvolvimento: Ensaios sobre Arte*, José Olympo, Rio de Janeiro, 2002, p 10. All translations by the author unless otherwise noted.

2. Gullar, ‘O Cubismo’ [1985], reprinted in *Etapas da Arte Contemporânea: Do Cubismo à Arte Neoconcreta*, Revan, Rio de Janeiro, 1998, p 13



Ferreira Gullar (to the right, at typewriter) in the editorial offices of the *Jornal do Brasil*, undated black and white photograph, photographer unknown, courtesy CPDocJB

3. Ibid

4. Gullar's Stages were preceded by Mário Pedrosa's 1952 *Panorama da Pintura Moderna*, a short booklet published as part of the 'Culture Notebooks' series of the Ministry of Education and Health (subsequently the Ministry of Education and Culture). Pedrosa's account, by turns anecdotal and broadly theoretical, repeatedly links the progressive abandonment of 'naturalism' within modern art to a growing 'internationalisation' brought about through cultural contact. In a concluding footnote, he gestures to the light experiments by the Brazilian painter and inventor Abraão Palatnik as evidence of future directions of art, but never goes so far as to suggest, as Gullar implies, that the future of the avant-garde lies in Brazil. My thanks to Sérgio Martins for calling my attention to Pedrosa's text.

in particular in Brazil. This endeavour can also be seen as a necessity dictated by the attitude that we assume in the face of Concrete art – and its roots – with the Manifesto Neoconcreto.³

In the absence of any substantial Portuguese-language textbook of modern art, the Stages had a distinct pedagogic function.⁴ As Gullar noted, when they were first collected as a book in 1985, the articles were not intended as an objective history of modern art but rather an explicit 'revision' – a 'new reading' of the avant-garde.⁵ Movements like Surrealism and Expressionism were therefore excluded in favour of the inexorable march of a *particular* avant-garde, one that began with Cubism and Futurism, continued with Russian Movements, Neoplasticism and Concrete art, and finally culminated with Neoconcrete art in the present day. Each chapter of the story was told in a series of episodes that unfolded weekly within the newspaper pages, followed by an 'Attempt at Comprehension', in which Gullar summarised and synthesised each movement's general trends. This summary also functioned as a vehicle of historiography in which theoretical arguments about a given movement were evaluated according to their contemporary relevance to Neoconcrete art. Gullar's 'new' history of the avant-garde was thus one of explicit linear development, its destination, rather than its starting point, determining its path.⁶

In Gullar's 'new' history of the avant-garde, the arrival at the present was a logical result of decisions made at the forks of various aesthetic roads that, taken together, forged a singular legacy of radical formal inno-

5. Gullar, 'Algumas Palavras', reprinted in *Etapas da Arte Contemporânea*, op cit, p 10

6. Gullar, 'Tentativa de compreensão I & II', reprinted in *Etapas da Arte Contemporânea*, op cit, pp 81-89

Revista de Arte, Suplemento Domínical, 27 JUN 1959, Pág. 1

Ferreira Gullar

Etapas da pintura contemporânea. O Cubismo - XI

Artes Plásticas
Ferreira Gullar

Etapas da pintura contemporânea. O Cubismo - XI

Tentativa de compreensão-I

Revista de Arte, Suplemento Domínical, 27 JUN 1959, Pág. 1

Para leitura dos artigos anteriores, ver quais bastantes fragmentos no texto, até onde estiverem disponíveis, em volume de arte, 2011, de autoria de Ferreira Gullar, publicado pela editora Record. Tinha-se a intenção de fazer um livro de arte, mas a situação econômica não permitiu a publicação do livro. A intenção de fazer um livro de arte, mas a situação econômica não permitiu a publicação do livro. A intenção de fazer um livro de arte, mas a situação econômica não permitiu a publicação do livro.

7. As Gullar wrote in the Preface to the second edition of *Etapas da Arte Contemporânea*, op cit, p 7, 'I intended, with a new "reading" of contemporary art, to situate Neoconcretism as the successive heir of the most radical artistic experiences of our time'.

Ferreira Gullar, 'Attempt at Comprehension' in *Suplemento Domínical do Jornal do Brasil*, 27 June 1959, p 3, courtesy CPDocJ B

vation inherited and ultimately advanced by Brazilian Neoconcretism.⁷ Essential problematics contained within works of art as mere potential were therefore realised through subsequent processes of argumentation, critique and revision, often at a significant chronological divide. In Gullar's reading, each formal impasse results in a series of solutions or interpretations: successful solutions propel the historical development of geometric abstraction; those that do not are understood as distractions from its evolutionary path. Gullar unfavourably contrasts Albert Gleizes

8. Gullar, 'Arte Neoconcreta', reprinted in *Etapas da Arte Contemporânea*, op cit, p 246. See also Gullar's 'Tentativa de Compreensão' for 'Movimentos Russos', in which he notes, 'Brazilian Concretism, derived from [the school of] Ulm, took the optical tendencies introduced by Lissitzky to Germany and Switzerland to its most extreme consequences. Neoconcretism, fighting against this specialisation of vision, returns to the problem put forward by Malevich and takes up the interrupted path once again.' p 148
9. Gullar, 'Arte Neoconcreta', op cit, p 244
10. Mari Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea, eds, *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2004, and *Versions and Inversions: Perspectives on Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2006. Ramírez's discussion of the particular characteristics of Latin American avant-gardes were also elaborated in two earlier essays, 'Blueprint Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America' in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1999, pp 550–562, and 'Tactics for Thriving on Adversity', in Jane Farver et al, *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, Queens Museum of Art, New York, 1999, pp 53–71.
11. As Caio Navarro de Toledo writes, 'If the expression "Ideology of Underdevelopment" never appeared in ISEB's statutes and general rules, it functioned for all intents and purposes as the emblem and slogan of the Institute and was explicit in almost all of its

and Jean Metzinger's 'rationalist' explanation of Cubism, for example, with 'synthetic' and 'phenomenological' interpretations derived from the precedent of Paul Cézanne. Similarly, he frames the emphasis on opticality and Gestalt theory in Concrete art as an 'interruption' from 'the fundamental question of contemporary art: the question of an autonomous non-representative visual language'.⁸ The vision of art that emerges from the Stages is thus at once highly interpretive (as practice) and emphatically teleological (as narration). Reading through the collected texts, one has a palpable sense of the author's impatience to reach the story's end, that point at which historical destiny dissolves into the present and Neoconcretism looks to its future rather than its past. Indeed, it is only this last episode of Gullar's story that is not capped with an 'Attempt at Comprehension'. 'Neoconcrete art still doesn't have a history', he wrote, 'as it is just being born'.⁹

From our twenty-first-century perspective, the evolutionary character of Gullar's account seems excessively positivist if not downright triumphal, its approach to history too restrictive to account for the decentred ambitions of a globalised history of art. In the catalogue for her landmark 2004 exhibition 'Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America', for example, Mari Carmen Ramírez argues that Latin American artists have approached the avant-garde as a series of problems to be taken up, a strategy with certain affinities to the position elaborated in Gullar's account. In Ramírez's formulation, however, the linear vector of Gullar's story is replaced with the idea of the 'constellation', a rhetorical figure adopted from T W Adorno which aims to dispense with the teleological objectives so often imputed to the avant-garde.¹⁰ Such a figure offers an elegant solution to reductive models of delay, derivation and copy that have plagued the discourse of Latin American art since the formation of the national academies in the nineteenth century. In favour of a centre-to-periphery model, it suggests relations that stretch in multiple directions across time and space.

Yet the concerted directionality of Gullar's own historical model is remarkably resistant to the decentring (or regionalist recentring) impulses of such reconfigured frameworks. If Gullar saw Brazilian Neoconcretism taking the 'next step' in the formal march of non-representational art, after all, he also saw this problematic unfolding from a determined point of origin in Europe. Rather than position Gullar's Stages in relation to current models of avant-garde historiography, then, I would like to explore the historical backdrop against which Gullar's ideas about history were played out. This backdrop involves not simply the perceived inheritance of the European avant-garde but the politics of developmentalism and dictatorship that shaped Brazil in the years immediately leading up to and following Gullar's Stages of 1959–1960. Such historical context is all but invisible within the Stages at the level of content. As narrative form, however, the Stages yield remarkable resonances with the developmentalist mandates of the time.

There is perhaps no place where such resonances are more clear, and yet unexpected, than in relation to the Superior Institute of Brazilian Studies (ISEB) and its pedagogic initiative 'New History of Brazil' launched in 1963. The ISEB was formed under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) in 1955 as a think tank whose aim was the elaboration of an 'ideology for development' suitable to Brazil.¹¹

publications and programmatic definitions'. *ISEB: Fábrica de Ideologias*, Ática, São Paulo, 1977, p. 32. See also Toledo, 'ISEB Intellectuals, the Left, and Marxism', *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 25, no. 1, January 1998, pp. 109–135 and Toledo, ed., *Intelectuais e Política no Brasil: A Experiência do ISEB*, Revan, Rio de Janeiro, 2005.

12. ISEB integrants such as Nelson Werneck Sodré frequently preferred to use the term 'autonomy' in place of 'independence'. See Werneck Sodré, *História da Nova História do Brasil*, Vozes, Petrópolis, 1986, p. 144.
13. The history classes were offered in the MEC auditorium from 1954 to 1957 and began as an initiative of the Instituto Brasileiro de Economia, Sociologia e Política (IBESP), the institutional precedent to ISEB, itself created only in 1955.
14. Roland Corbisier, remarks delivered at the course 'Introdução aos Problemas do Brasil' organised by ISEB at the Ministério da Educação e Cultura, December 1955, published in *Formação e Problema da Cultura Brasileira*, Ministério da Educação e Cultura, Instituto Superior de Estudos Brasileiros, Rio de Janeiro, 1960, p. 50.
15. For a history of the *História Nova do Brasil*, see Sodré, *História da Nova História do Brasil*, op. cit.; Cláudio Giordano, ed., *História Nova do Brasil 1963–1993*, São Paulo, Giordano, 1993; and Elaine Lourenço, 'História Nova do Brasil: Revisitando uma Obra Polêmica', *Revista Brasileira de História*, vol. 28, no. 56, 2008, pp. 385–406.
16. Roberto Pontual, 'Introdução' [1963], reprinted in Giordano, ed., op. cit., p. 115.

ISEB's integrants believed that Brazil's development towards a fully modernised state was inevitable. They differed, however, on how this national development was to be achieved, some calling for deregulated participation in the global economy, others advocating an 'autonomous' process of national industrialisation with foreign influence closely controlled by the state.¹² As part of these discussions, ISEB spearheaded a number of research and pedagogic initiatives including public symposia and graduate-level history classes held in the MEC auditorium in Rio, the same building out of which the Museum of Modern Art operated from 1952 to 1958, and also where the 'Second Exhibition of Neoconcrete Art' was held in November 1960, one month after Gullar's Stages reached their exhilarating end.¹³ As the titles of these ISEB events indicate – 'Introduction to the Problems of Brazil', 'Philosophy in Brazil', and so on – the institute understood national economic development as inextricably linked both to an overarching social and cultural modernisation and to a critical reflexivity concerning this project in and of itself. As Roland Corbisier, philosopher and director of ISEB, proclaimed in 1955:

To discover the Nation, to become conscious of its reality, of its problems, and to forge an ideology capable of configuring its future, promoting its development and its emancipation. We have nothing else to do, if not to invent our destiny, constructing a culture that will be the expression and adequate form of the new Brazil we must create.¹⁴

As ISEB moved increasingly towards a leftist model of national development in the years after 1958, adherents such as Nelson Werneck Sodré, who headed the institute's history department, sought ways to extend these pedagogic initiatives, for example, by bringing history classes directly to workers' unions. In 1963, on the invitation of MEC, Sodré assembled a team of young historians at ISEB to produce a series of alternative history textbooks for middle-school students titled the 'New History of Brazil'.¹⁵ Collaboratively conceptualised, written and edited, the textbooks offered a revisionist neo-Marxist narrative counter to official historiography. Starting with *The Discovery of Brazil*, the series refused the existing division between 'General' and 'Brazilian' history, insisting instead that the identity of the nation must be understood in terms of the wider development of global capitalism and the struggles against it, which together provided history with its directional force. Only by understanding this integrated history of dialectical episodes, the authors argued, could Brazil's dependency and underdevelopment be adequately theorised and overcome. Roberto Pontual, writing on behalf of MEC in the series' introduction, noted that the books aimed at nothing less than 'accelerating the historic process of Brazil'.¹⁶ The New History's historiographic intervention thus provided the interpretive logic upon which an 'autonomous' model of Brazilian development could be based.

The first five textbooks in the New History of Brazil series were published in February 1964, little more than a month before the coup that launched Brazil into a repressive military dictatorship that was to last more than twenty years. Within days of the coup, police forces invaded ISEB headquarters and confiscated the manuscripts for the remaining books in the series. By 1965, the majority of the series' authors had been imprisoned, tortured or forced into exile. The published editions of the New History series, meanwhile, were banned and publicly

denounced for ‘disseminating communism to our youth [through the] Marxist interpretation of our country’s historical facts’.¹⁷ In 1965, police forces also invaded Ferreira Gullar’s house, confiscating, among other material, the collected articles of the Stages of Contemporary Art gathered in a folder marked ‘From Cubism to Neoconcrete Art’.¹⁸ Gullar would later quip that this seizure may have had to do with a confusion between ‘Cubism’ and ‘Cuba’. For the purposes of this article, however, it illuminates a peculiar moment in which the ‘new’ histories of art and the ideology of development crossed paths.

By 1961, Neoconcretism had already begun to dissipate as a defined movement, and lost one of its key discursive venues when the Sunday Supplement stopped publication the same year. Gullar himself felt that Neoconcretism had reached a theoretical impasse and conceived of increasingly extreme measures for its termination as a historical episode, for example, by proposing a museum exhibition in which the works would detonate within an hour (perhaps the ultimate ‘Attempt at Comprehension’). By 1962, Gullar had joined the leadership of the Centre for Popular Culture (CPC), a leftist cultural organisation linked to the National Student Union, which sought to bring culture ‘to the people’, much in line with the increasingly leftist sympathies of the ISEB.¹⁹ In this capacity, Gullar’s ideas about art continued to undergo radical revision, culminating in *Culture in Question*, written in 1964, just before the military coup. This series of essays was intended as an explicit, polemical rupture with Brazilian avant-garde practices and a theoretical justification of the use of art in the ideological struggle. As Gullar wrote, ‘The Brazilian intellectual... is living at an instant of option... to participate or not in the struggle for the economic liberation of the country.’²⁰

Gullar’s condemnation of non-engaged art in *Culture in Question* came with a new historical alignment between art, nationalism and the politics of the left. No longer was radical Brazilian art understood as the culmination of a historical tradition initiated by the European avant-garde, as he had suggested in the Stages. Instead, it was the product of autonomous national production fiercely resistant to external influence. Gullar’s renouncement of the avant-garde thus hinged on a reversal of historical vectors. History no longer arrived at Brazil but was to be generated *from* Brazil through a recasting of the category of ‘the new’. Artists who refused the imperative of national production would inevitably fall into the trap of delay. As Gullar wrote, they will continue to ‘paint, at a delay, European painting’, caught in a perpetual cycle of ‘Paris says, Recife repeats’.²¹ The ‘new’, aligned during the time of the Stages exclusively with formal innovation, thus came to describe by 1964 the political, social and economic order that might bring about an emancipated Brazil. ‘The true artistic vanguard in an underdeveloped country’, Gullar wrote, ‘is one that, searching for the new, searches for the liberation of men.’²²

In 1969, Gullar revisited his arguments in an essay titled ‘Vanguard and Underdevelopment’, which questioned the very applicability of the avant-garde to a place like Brazil.²³ As Werneck Sodré queried in the preface to Gullar’s essay, ‘Can there be universality in vanguardism? Is it the same everywhere, in developed and underdeveloped countries?’²⁴ Criticising precisely the ‘linear development’ of art he had himself advanced in the Stages, Gullar rejected a formalist definition of the

17. Eraldo Gueiros Leite, ‘História Nova: Denúncia do Procurador-Geral’ 29 March [1966], reproduced in *Revista Civilização Brasileira*, vol 1, no 11–12, December 1966 – March 1967, pp 208–212

18. See Gullar’s account of this incident in the Preface to the 2nd edition of *Etapas da Arte Contemporânea*, op cit, p 7.

19. See in particular ‘Anteprojeto do Manifesto do Centro Popular de Cultura’ [March 1962], reprinted in Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda, *Impressões de Viagem: CPC, Vanguarda e Desbunde 1960–1970* [1980], Aeroplano, Rio de Janeiro, 2004, pp 135–168.

20. Gullar, ‘Cultura Posta em Questão’ [1964], reprinted in *Cultura Posta em Questão*, op cit, p 17

21. *Ibid*, p 53

22. *Ibid*, p 176

23. Gullar, ‘Vanguarda e Subdesenvolvimento’ [1969], reprinted in *Cultura Posta em Questão*, op cit, p 171. Parts of this essay were originally published in *Revista Civilização Brasileira*.

24. Nelson Werneck Sodré, ‘Introdução à Vanguarda e Subdesenvolvimento’ [1969], reprinted in *Cultura Posta em Questão*, op cit, p 162

avant-garde in favour of one determined by economic structure.²⁵ For the first time in his writings on the subject, Gullar examined the inception of the avant-garde as an integrated historical phenomenon in Europe, one dependent on the emergence and consolidation of the bourgeoisie in the wake of the French Revolution. In an account indebted to his contemporaneous readings of Jean-Paul Sartre and György Lukács, Gullar noted that the avant-garde's antagonistic relationship to bourgeois society was a result of its marginalisation from the very class it helped to install, its claim for aesthetic freedom and formal autonomy an echo of the demands for political liberty that fuelled the struggle against aristocratic rule. For Gullar, this contradictory relationship with the bourgeoisie was ultimately reflected in the circular conceptual structures that infected twentieth-century artistic production and historical sensibility alike. In works such as James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, which famously begins and ends with the same word, for example, Gullar saw the structural equivalent of a bourgeois historical vision in which capitalism is the final stage of historical evolution. Such a vision, as he writes, 'does not evolve [but] only repeats', thereby disallowing the possibility of forward movement that Marxist historical materialism holds at its core.²⁶

Such a historical analysis begs a series of historical questions. If the European avant-garde was historically determined by the particularities of its class formation, how could its structure be translated to the economic realities of Brazil, a country whose ruling class was built on slave labour and which in the 1960s was still in the grips of this pre-industrial past? How could a vanguard art shock the bourgeoisie when it was 'imported' as the cultural capital of this same bourgeoisie? How could a claim for political freedom transform into one for formal autonomy within a country that still struggled against neocolonial rule? How could a dynamic vision of history emerge from an avant-garde submerged within the repetition of its own contradictory relation to society? How indeed, to posit a vanguard in underdevelopment within its own terms?

If one follows the logic of 'Vanguard and Underdevelopment', Gullar's earlier *Stages* is a case for the avant-garde's last stand. For Gullar, the historical framework of Brazilian underdevelopment rendered the notion of a universal avant-garde formed by a singular legacy of formal innovation inadmissible. The historic inevitability the critic had previously ascribed to the march of advanced art from Cubism to Neoconcretism was now a function of an economic order, the march of an oppressed society towards liberation, its future exhilaratingly close but just out of reach. Having finally 'arrived' in Brazil with Neoconcretism in 1959, the avant-garde became by 1969 a historical chimera, a smokescreen for the political work at hand.

Gullar ends 'Vanguard and Underdevelopment' by bracketing the question of a Brazilian avant-garde and offering up in its place the notion of the 'open work'. Although the Brazilian Concrete poet Haroldo de Campos first theorised the open work in a short essay of 1955, Gullar's reference is to Umberto Eco's lengthier text of 1962, which articulates 'openness' in terms of works whose structural organisation generates new interpretations as a precondition of their realisation.²⁷ By foregrounding process rather than product, Eco's

25. Gullar, however, does not mention the 'Etapas' but imputes the formalist narrative solely to the Concrete poets. As he writes, 'The objective was to present the course of art in terms of a linear evolution, destined and irrespective of historical conditioning, as if the artistic process could exist as a separate history detached from the general history of men.' p 20

26. *Ibid.*, p 33

27. Haroldo de Campos, 'A Obra Aberta' [1955], reprinted in Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari, eds, *Teoria da Poesia Concreta: Textos, Críticos e Manifestos 1955-1960*. Invenção, São Paulo, 1965; Umberto Eco, 'The Poetics of the Open Work' [1962], in *The Open Work*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1989

formulation provided Gullar with a foundation upon which to map a Marxist schema of dialectical forces. In his revised model, the open work's dynamic oscillation between the particular and the universal ruptures the hermetic structure of works like *Finnegans Wake* which, in Gullar's reading, simply repeat bourgeois society's circular historical conception but refuse contact with society itself. Drawing from a 1968 translation of Lucáks's writings on Marxist aesthetics, Gullar argues that is only through the particular – Brazil's actual conditions of historical underdevelopment, for example – that one might access the universal.²⁸ Essence, in other words, is revealed through the concreteness of phenomena, but not the other way around. The open work therefore incorporates historical contradiction as the very condition of the particular, rather than eliding it in order to operate as universal and abstract. As a *form*, then, the open work does not substitute for history, but rather functions as an actualised model of its hermeneutic demands.

Gullar's own role in the Brazilian avant-garde is curiously absent for the great majority of 'Vanguard and Underdevelopment'. When he notes that the formalist position of the Concrete poets became unsustainable circa 1961–1962, for example, he writes of the urgency of the struggle for reform and the rise of the working class, but never touches on the theoretical impasse he himself appears to have faced.²⁹ Yet, as Gullar's last article for the Sunday Supplement, 'Time and the Work' (1961) indicates, this impasse was the representational degree zero of the formalist narrative he himself had set forth in the Stages. As his 1961 text argues, the Neoconcrete work of art, having successfully eliminated all figuration and external reference and becoming what Gullar called a 'non-object', gains significance solely by virtue of the inner tension produced in its self-reflection *as art*. In so doing, however, it 'consumes' itself and is 'exhausted' of all meaning, resulting, finally, in a situation in which 'the work will not speak of anything prior to itself'.³⁰ This position, as Gullar recounted in a 2006 interview, ultimately 'offered no path forward, no way out'.³¹

Gullar did find an exit, of course, to politics and a profoundly reconfigured approach to vanguard art. Considering the evacuated present of his point of departure, however – one seemingly stripped of history and immersed in the pure autonomy of reflexivity – it is significant that in 'Vanguard and Underdevelopment' Gullar briefly mentions Neoconcrete art and its outgrowths – specifically, his own spatial poems, Lygia Clark's 'Bichos' and Hélio Oiticica's 'Parangolés' – as examples of open works which, by requiring viewer participation, 'return to reality' and the 'concrete facts of life'.³² How is it that works once seen as foreclosing all reference to the world could be recuperated as dialectical models for historical materialist thought? To draw this discussion to conclusion, I want to suggest that the distance between these positions describes the outer limits of the developmental model of history that underlies both Gullar's Stages and the ISEB's New History and, further, that these limits correspond to the conflict between two guiding concepts of ideology at work in the philosophy of the ISEB.

In 'Time and the Work', Gullar argues that the Neoconcrete non-object, having thrown off all relations to the world, becomes nothing less than 'an authentic manifestation of the interior reality of the artist'.³³ Rather than operate as a dialogue between the work and

28. György Lucáks, *Introdução a uma Estética Marxista*, Civilização Brasileira, Rio de Janeiro, 1968

29. Gullar, 'Vanguarda e Subdesenvolvimento', *op cit*, p 21

30. Gullar, 'O Tempo e a Obra', *Suplemento Dominical do Jornal do Brasil*, 18 February 1961, reprinted in Gullar, *Experiência Neoconcreta: Momento-Limite da Arte*, Cosac Naify, São Paulo, 2007, p 110. See also Gullar's retrospective account of his experience in this volume in which he notes in particular the theoretical significance of his last two articles for the SDJB as gesturing to the limit-situations of the movement as a whole.

31. Interview with author, Rio de Janeiro, 7 May 2006

32. Gullar, 'Vanguarda e Subdesenvolvimento', *op cit*, p 65

33. Gullar, 'O Tempo e a Obra', *op cit*, p 110

O TEMPO E A OBRA

Na *saída* anterior, tocamos no problema do lugar da obra, concluído pela constatação de que não há lugar para a obra de arte fora do seu próprio lugar, e seu próprio lugar. Acrescente-se que, por não possuir ser, por se esgotar em significação, a obra de arte não faz outro coisa que consumir o lugar, que se consumiu a si mesma enquanto realidade espacial objetiva. Logo, a obra de arte se especializa para negar o espaço, se faz presente para poder desaparecer, e com isso mantém em seu seio uma contradição inevitável: para negar a realidade imediata é ela obrigada a afirmar essa realidade com todo

em que ela nasce para a cultura. Não obstante, esse morte é exterior a ela, não a impedindo, portanto, de reaparecer como expressão viva noutro época do nautro lugar. O certo é que a sua eficácia dependerá sempre da tensão entre a afirmação e a negação do real, e entre a afirmação e a negação da cultura. Essa noção de arte está estritamente ligada ao caráter dinâmico da cultura moderna. Se a cultura renascentista é espacial e racionalista, a cultura moderna é temporal e crítica. No âmbito da pintura, percebe-se muito claramente a passagem da concepção espacial do mundo para a concepção

temporal, no Impressionismo. O homem percebe que o tempo passa e que não possui exterior às coisas: é o próprio mudar das coisas, na sua aparência. A pintura sai do mito e da História para se defrontar com o presente e descobre que o presente não é mais que uma fração do contínuo mudar. O Impressionismo, por ser uma volta radical à natureza, despidendo das mistificações, revela a impossibilidade de uma arte naturalista. Que valor da realidade poderia ter uma obra que não era mais que a fixação de um instante entre milhares de outros? A Catedral de Rouen, às dez horas, nega



impeto. Ela põe o que deve tirar, e sua expressão, em última análise, não é mais que a tensão entre esses dois impulsos contrários que nela se manifestam simultaneamente. Desse ponto-de-vista, a obra de arte está viva enquanto se mantém aceso, em seu seio, aquela contradição. Ora, se assim é, se a obra de arte exige, para nascer, uma situação conflituosa básica, não pode ela surgir sendo fora dos conceitos objetivos, fora também das categorias e dos gêneros. A própria noção de arte deve ser ponto de fuga. De modo que a obra mure na medida em que ganha a qualificação de obra de arte, isto é, no momento mesmo

em que ela nasce para a cultura. Não obstante, esse morte é exterior a ela, não a impedindo, portanto, de reaparecer como expressão viva noutro época do nautro lugar. O certo é que a sua eficácia dependerá sempre da tensão entre a afirmação e a negação do real, e entre a afirmação e a negação da cultura. Essa noção de arte está estritamente ligada ao caráter dinâmico da cultura moderna. Se a cultura renascentista é espacial e racionalista, a cultura moderna é temporal e crítica. No âmbito da pintura, percebe-se muito claramente a passagem da concepção espacial do mundo para a concepção

temporal, no Impressionismo. O homem percebe que o tempo passa e que não possui exterior às coisas: é o próprio mudar das coisas, na sua aparência. A pintura sai do mito e da História para se defrontar com o presente e descobre que o presente não é mais que uma fração do contínuo mudar. O Impressionismo, por ser uma volta radical à natureza, despidendo das mistificações, revela a impossibilidade de uma arte naturalista. Que valor da realidade poderia ter uma obra que não era mais que a fixação de um instante entre milhares de outros? A Catedral de Rouen, às dez horas, nega

Concurso para construção da Assembleia Legislativa de São Paulo: Cr\$ 3 milhões e 500 mil

O Estado de São Paulo de São Paulo, através do Conselho de Arquitetura, Engenharia e Urbanismo, abriu um concurso para a construção da Assembleia Legislativa de São Paulo. O projeto será desenvolvido pelo arquiteto Dr. João de Deus Pinheiro, com o auxílio de um escritório de arquitetura especializado em São Paulo. O prazo para apresentação de propostas é até o dia 15 de março de 1961.

- NOTÍCIAS DA SEMANA**
- 1 - O Conselho de Arquitetura, Engenharia e Urbanismo, abriu um concurso para a construção da Assembleia Legislativa de São Paulo. O projeto será desenvolvido pelo arquiteto Dr. João de Deus Pinheiro, com o auxílio de um escritório de arquitetura especializado em São Paulo. O prazo para apresentação de propostas é até o dia 15 de março de 1961.
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Jári do I Salão de Artes Plásticas da Petite Galerie

O I Salão de Artes Plásticas da Petite Galerie de São Paulo, organizado pelo Conselho de Arquitetura, Engenharia e Urbanismo, abriu suas portas em 18 de fevereiro de 1961. O salão apresenta obras de artistas brasileiros e estrangeiros, incluindo pinturas, esculturas e gravuras. O evento é patrocinado pelo Conselho de Arquitetura, Engenharia e Urbanismo.

Thomas Messer, novo diretor do Guggenheim

Dr. Thomas M. Messer, presidente do Conselho de Arquitetura, Engenharia e Urbanismo, foi nomeado novo diretor do Museu de Arte de São Paulo, anteriormente conhecido como Museu de Arte Moderna. Messer assumirá suas funções em março de 1961. Ele é um arquiteto e escritor brasileiro, conhecido por suas obras de arquitetura e teoria da arte.

Vanni ganhou concurso de cartazes para Bial

O concurso de cartazes para a Bial, organizado pelo Conselho de Arquitetura, Engenharia e Urbanismo, teve como vencedor o artista Vanni. O vencedor recebeu um prêmio em dinheiro e a oportunidade de trabalhar para a Bial. O concurso foi aberto a todos os artistas brasileiros e estrangeiros.

Ferreira Gullar, 'Time and the Work' in *Suplemento Domínical do Jornal do Brasil*, 18 February 1961, p 3, courtesy CPDcJb

34. 'Entrevista Ferreira Gullar', in Fernando Cocchiareale and Anna Bella Geiger, *Abstracionismo Geométrico e Informal: A Vanguarda Brasileira nos Anos Cinquenta*, FUNARTE/Instituto Nacional de Artes Plásticas, Rio de Janeiro, 1987, p 96

viewer, as Gullar had previously suggested, the work and artist (who is, of course, the work's first viewer) now coincided as a single reflective consciousness. As Gullar elaborated in a key 1987 interview, however, this coincidence did not result in the affirmation of the subject within an embodied, historical reality; on the contrary, 'the non-object absorbs the action of the person within itself'.³⁴ The result, paradoxically, is the aestheticisation of action as pure reflexivity rather than its orientation outwards towards what Gullar called in his 1969 article 'the concrete'.

It is precisely this dynamic of auto-reflection that is redirected in Gullar's 1969 re-reading of the Neoconcrete object as an 'open work'. Rather than absorb the subject's participation, the work returns its viewer to the contingent conditions of the encounter and the viewer's own capacity to act. The viewer does not coincide with the work, in other words, but re-assumes a central role as its interpreter.

It is this foundational role of interpretation that returns us to Stages of Contemporary Art and the New History of Brazil. As explicitly revisionist projects, both histories foreground the interpretive potential of narrative as a corrective to, in the first instance, an excessively rationalist theory of artistic innovation, and, in the second, the colonial and neocolonial biases of official history. Rejecting the neutrality of historical narration, these revisions foreground history's uses for the present and speak self-consciously from an embedded, even polemical point of view. Yet, in both cases, this corrective is ultimately channelled towards a teleology with 'autonomy' located elusively at its end. If in Gullar's Stages this autonomy consisted of freedom from representation and external reference, culminating in the work as pure reflective consciousness, with the New History it involved eradicating the mystifying vapour of false consciousness so that Brazil might realise its potential as a fully independent, modernised state. To the extent that Werneck Sodr e and his team imagined the demystified conscious of the reader as coincident with this liberated nation and its economic development, the New History's model of autonomy also opens up to Gullar's reservations about the Neoconcrete non-object wherein, in this case, the subject's participatory action would be fully absorbed by the state.

As Caio Navarro de Toledo has noted in his key study, *ISEB: F brica de Ideologias*, Werneck Sodr e was the only integrant within the ISEB who believed that the developmental nationalism promoted by the New History and the institute as a whole was not in itself an ideology, but rather a natural and historical truth.³⁵ For Werneck Sodr e, it was ideology that produced false consciousness and was thus an instrument of the interests of the ruling class. For other ISEB thinkers, by contrast, ideology was a necessary component of any developmental platform. For H lio Jaguaribe, for example, ideologies could be 'representative' or 'authentic', the first corresponding to the situational interests of an individual class, the second to the interests of a community in total.³⁶ As Alvaro Viera Pinto further argued, authentic ideologies proceed from the masses, rather than being imposed upon them.³⁷ Roland Corbisier, giving ISEB's dominant approach to ideology its most emphatic formulation in the mould of Lenin's famous phrase, put it this way:

... if it is true... that there is no revolutionary movement without a theory of revolution, then there will be no development without the planned formulation of an ideology for national development.³⁸

For the majority of ISEB thinkers, then, ideology was not a restrictive term for false consciousness but the means by which knowledge becomes active through reflection on the concrete conditions of underdevelopment. Like Gullar's open work, it moves dialectically from the particular to the general, forming the critical consciousness required to generate material, historical change.

35. Toledo, *ISEB: F brica de Ideologias*, op cit

36. H lio Jaguaribe, *O Nacionalismo na Atualidade Brasileira*, Minist rio da Educa o e Cultura, Rio de Janeiro, 1958, p 49

37. Alvaro Viera Pinto, *Ideologia e Desenvolvimento Nacional*, Minist rio da Educa o e Cultura, Rio de Janeiro, 1959

38. Corbisier, remarks delivered at the course 'Filosofia no Brasil' organised by ISEB at the Minist rio da Educa o e Cultura, 1956, published by the Ministry in *Forma o e Problema da Cultura Brasileira*, p 87.

If the non-object and the open work describe the outer limits of a 'vanguard conscious of its development', as Corbisier described ISEB's function in 1956, they also indicate the potential for two of its greatest flaws – first, the capacity for self-reflection to collapse inwards, and second, a prescriptive, mechanical dialecticism – both of which were present in the teleological vision of development to which ISEB ultimately subscribed. The inner limits of such concepts, however, suggest a different story, one in which Brazil, like a historically considered work of art, is an interpretive construct open to change. In his 1959 'Manifesto Neoconcreto', Gullar argued that despite the theoretical contradictions posed by Piet Mondrian's texts, the earlier artist's paintings were 'alive and fecund', and opened up a field of possibility for contemporary artists who approached the historical works not as dogma, but as organic expressions to be experienced and reconsidered in the present. A few paragraphs later, Gullar put forward perhaps the defining description of Neoconcrete art:

We approach the work of art neither as a 'machine' nor as an 'object', but as a 'quasi-corpus', that is... a being that analysis can deconstruct into its various parts, but which can only be fully understood phenomenologically.³⁹

Durational, holistic, and historically dynamic, Gullar's Neoconcrete work is curiously anticipated by Corbisier, who, writing in a 1956 statement on Brazilian national identity, put it this way:

Brazil is not, therefore, a thing, an object, a 'substance'. It is a function, a process that occurs over time, a reality 'in fieri', a totality in movement, whose dialectical structure can only be understood and explained as a function of history.⁴⁰

39. Gullar, 'Manifesto Neoconcreto', *Suplemento Dominical do Jornal do Brasil*, 22 March 1959

40. *Ibid.*, p 58