

AFTER THE POLITICS OF ABSTRACTION: AVANT-GARDE ART AND  
CRITICISM IN JAPAN AND BRAZIL CIRCA 1960

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**AFTER THE POLITICS OF ABSTRACTION: AVANT-GARDE ART AND  
CRITICISM IN JAPAN AND BRAZIL CIRCA 1960**

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Displacement of the practices and radical theories of avant-garde art from the artistic centers and cultural capitals of North America and Europe to post-Occupation Japan and pre-military dictatorship Brazil since the early 1950s was at the origin of some of the most innovative reflections on the meanings, limits and possibilities of art in the twentieth century. Consciously translating foreign ideas into the social turmoil of their local contexts, avant-garde artists, poets and critics took upon themselves the task of redefining the role of art as a privileged mode of political intervention.

The dissertation explores conceptions of the political potential of art and transformations in the modes of social insertion of artistic practices in Brazil and Japan circa 1960. Whereas the political battles of 1950s art were fought mostly in the camp of abstract painting, circa 1960 a young generation of artists breached the physical frame of canvas painting and the institutional frame of art in favor of more immediate modes of social insertion of artistic practice. By conceiving of the spectator of art no longer as a receptor of stimuli, but rather as an active, participating subject, artists such as Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica and Akasegawa Genpei undermined the paradigm of aesthetic contemplation, and opened the way for new modes of political intervention through art. After the waning of the postwar avant-gardes, the radical possibilities they revealed remained decisive for artistic practice in the ensuing decades.

This study follows the traces of a certain discursive continuity, which crosses the borders of these two disparate realms of avant-garde art. The first chapter explores the ostensible fractures and some often misleading similarities between the discourse of avant-garde art in postwar Brazil and Japan, and elaborates on the meanings of what I call their fundamental contemporaneity. Each of the following chapters focuses on a different moment of this history through the exploration of the works of one or more individuals; their sequence coincides in part with the general chronology of events, but their division is primarily a function of the logical order of the argument.



## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Pedro Erber was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1975. He received a B.A. in philosophy from Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro and an M.A. in philosophy from Pontificia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro. He conducted research on Martin Heidegger's political thought at Albert-Ludwigs Universität Freiburg and Université Marc Bloch, Strasbourg. After completing his M.A., he was a research student at The University of Tokyo working on Jacques Derrida and the philosophy of the Kyoto School. He joined the Ph.D. program in East Asian Literature at Cornell University in 2002 and was a Japan Foundation Fellow and guest researcher at Rikkyo University, Tokyo. Pedro is the author of *Política e Verdade no Pensamento de Martin Heidegger* (São Paulo: Loyola, 2004). In July 14<sup>th</sup> 2009 he successfully defended his Ph.D. dissertation. He will join the Department of Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures at Rutgers University, Newark as assistant professor in the fall of 2009.

to my parents

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## INTRODUCTION

As a former philosophy major, I must admit to a certain discomfort regarding the notion of “fieldwork.” Nonetheless, a few years ago, following the usual course of an area studies Ph.D. candidate, I traveled to Tokyo to pursue my field research on Japanese postwar art history. Reluctant, at first, to contact artists and critics whose theories I could access through their works and writings, I finally gave in to the idea of conducting interviews; if nothing else, at least to justify the need of physical presence in the “field.” Introduced by a common friend and colleague,<sup>1</sup> I had the chance of meeting the art critic Haryū Ichirō, a witness and co-conspirator of the Japanese avant-gardes since the early 1950s, at his old house by the woods in a suburb of Tokyo. Remembering our conversation that afternoon, I cannot help recalling the observations by anthropologist Johannes Fabian concerning the “shared intersubjective Time,” which constitutes fieldwork as a privileged moment of “coevalness” or contemporaneity.<sup>2</sup> That afternoon in Kawasaki, the question of contemporaneity seemed present in our conversation in a number of different ways.

When I mentioned that my research also concerned the works of artists and critics active in 1960s Rio de Janeiro, Haryū told me that he, too, had been in Brazil years ago, in the late 1970s, as the Japanese commissioner to the São Paulo Biennale. His most vivid memory from the trip was of one book by the poet and literary critic Ferreira Gullar, *Vanguarda e Subdesenvolvimento (Avant-Garde and*

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<sup>1</sup> Art critic and independent curator Miyata Tatsuya, whom I thank for his most valuable help during my research in Tokyo.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other. How Anthropology makes its Object* (New York: Columbia U Press, 2002).

*Underdevelopment*),<sup>3</sup> which he recalled having read while looking up each and every word in the dictionary. “The author claimed that the very idea of avant-garde was not suitable to the reality of an underdeveloped country like Brazil. It penetrated the big cities, but was never able to reach further into the countryside,”<sup>4</sup> he explained, almost thirty years after the arduous reading. As the conversation went further, I missed the opportunity to ask him what exactly in Ferreira Gullar’s text captured his attention. At any rate, there must have been something in that seemingly remote subject that drove Haryū’s obstinate interest.

Displacement of the practices and radical theories of avant-garde art from the artistic centers and cultural capitals of North America and Europe to post-Occupation Japan and pre-military dictatorship Brazil since the early 1950s was at the origin of some of the most innovative reflections on the meanings, limits and possibilities of art in the twentieth century. Consciously translating foreign ideas into the social turmoil of their local contexts, avant-garde artists, poets and critics took upon themselves the task of redefining the role of art as a privileged mode of political intervention. The story I want to tell concerns the emergence of a set of practices that questioned the limits of art as an object of contemplation. Whereas the political battles of 1950s art were fought mostly in the camp of abstract painting, circa 1960 a young generation of artists breached the physical frame of canvas painting and the institutional frame of art in favor of more immediate modes of social insertion of artistic practice. By conceiving of the spectator of art no longer as a receptor of stimuli, but rather as an active, participating subject, artists such as Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica and Akasegawa Genpei undermined the paradigm of aesthetic contemplation, and opened

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<sup>3</sup> José Ribamar Ferreira Gullar, *Vanguarda e Subdesenvolvimento* [*Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment*] (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1969).

<sup>4</sup> Haryū Ichirō, Personal interview. 26 October 2006.

the way for new modes of political intervention through art. After the waning of the postwar avant-gardes, the radical possibilities they revealed remained decisive for artistic practice in the ensuing decades.

This dissertation explores conceptions of the political potential of art and transformations in the modes of social insertion of artistic practices circa 1960. Strictly speaking, this study is not a work of art history; its object is not exclusively artworks and its method not primarily formal analysis. I am concerned with the verbal and non-verbal (visual, material) practices that constitute the discourse of postwar avant-garde art including paintings, objects and performance records, descriptions of ephemeral events, artists' writings and critical essays, theoretical interventions, interviews and conversations with artists and critics. This inquiry takes the shape of an intellectual history of artistic practices in Japan and Brazil during the 1950s and 1960s; yet, its principal theoretical concern is not restricted to particular historical or geographical sites. While the context of post-1960s art is beyond the scope of the present analysis, my approach to these two disparate and barely related sites of postwar art seeks to shed new light on current debates about the political insertion and potential of contemporary art.

To which extent are we still contemporaneous with the cultural politics of the 1960s generation? Does the so-called "contemporary art" of today and its politics still inhabit the same time and space as the art of the 1960s? "The sixties are endless. We still live within them," writes Pamela Lee in conclusion to her 2004 monograph on the experience of time in 1960s art.<sup>5</sup> On the other extreme, the art critic and co-founder of the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris (Palais de Tokyo) Nicolas Bourriaud attributes the "misunderstandings surrounding 1990s art" to a widespread tendency

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<sup>5</sup> Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia: on time in the art of the 1960s* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), p. 259.

among critics to “take shelter behind the sixties art history.”<sup>6</sup> If the present analysis allowed for any sort of broader claim about the experience of time of a whole generation, I would say “the sixties” were ephemeral rather than endless. And yet, a large share of the artistic practices and theories (not to mention the political thought) of the recent decades has been incessantly trying to create the conditions for a long-term maintenance of the fleeting experience which the sixties represent. Despite Bourriaud’s claims about the originality of 1990s art, the basic tenets of what he recognized as the paradigm of a “relational aesthetics” typically exemplify a widespread attempt to institutionalize the revolutionary legacies of the sixties within the contemporary network of museums, galleries, biennials and art fairs.

Relational art makes the realm of human interactions its primary site and horizon. Proponents of the relational paradigm see this turn to the realm of interaction and its social context as the source of contemporary art’s political potential.<sup>7</sup> According to Bourriaud, “Contemporary art is definitely developing a political project when it endeavors to move into the relational realm by turning it into an issue.”<sup>8</sup> Yet, if there is such a thing as a relational turn, namely, as a move into the realm of human interactions no longer mediated by the private experience of the work of art, it is by no means an original characteristic of 1990s art. Lygia Clark coined the expression “relational objects” in 1976, when she decidedly abandoned the realm of institutionalized art and engaged her artistic researches in a new form of therapeutic practice. The question of immediate human interaction, which occupied the center of

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<sup>6</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 1998), p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> For further critical approaches to the context of contemporary “relational” artistic practices and their political implications see Claire Bishop, ed. *Participation* (London: Whitechapel, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006); Reinaldo Laddaga, *Estética de la emergencia: La formación de otra cultura de las artes* (Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo Editora, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

Clark's experiments since the late 1960s, finally led her relational propositions outside of the realm of art itself. Nowhere does Bourriaud mention Clark's "relational objects" (a concept developed during Clark's experiments at the Paris Sorbonne in the early 1970s) as one of the obvious precursors of his "relational aesthetics." Apart from authorial concerns, this omission conceals a theoretical problem; it obscures the impossibility of reconciling radical relationality with the realm of institutionalized art, which Clark's trajectory brings to light in a cogent fashion.

To some extent, art and aesthetics have long been relational; and this relational character is the locus of a certain politics of art. Even the private, individual aesthetic experience of the work of art has been historically conceived in terms of its underlying relational aspect. In Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, the site of this fundamental relationality of the aesthetic experience is called "taste" and explained in terms of a "kind of common sense," or common sentiment (*Geschmack als einer Art von sensus communis*).<sup>9</sup> The so-called "disinterested" pleasure in the judgment of beauty is precisely the pleasure of sharing and partaking in the same judgment with others, the pleasure in "universal communication without the mediation of concepts,"<sup>10</sup> the possibility of what Kant terms a "subjective universality."<sup>11</sup> This is why, according to Kant, "the beautiful interests empirically only in society,"<sup>12</sup> and why "the aesthetic power of judgment rather than the intellectual can bear the name of a communal sense."<sup>13</sup> One can see how easily this sense of a communal sharing of taste in society can become the basis for what Pierre Bourdieu criticized in terms of a

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<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

marker of bourgeois “distinction.”<sup>14</sup> Yet, in one way or the other, what is at stake in the judgment of beauty is the essentially communal, relational aspect of the aesthetic experience as the site of a certain politics. The plot of this mediatory role of the artwork as an object of contemplative experience is what Jacques Rancière calls the “aesthetic regime of art.”<sup>15</sup> Because the aesthetic regime confers, from the outset, an eminently political function upon the work of art, it is not necessary to abandon aesthetics in the name of art’s political relevance; as Claire Bishop puts it, “the aesthetic doesn’t need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, as it already inherently contains this ameliorative promise.”<sup>16</sup> The contemplative spectator’s private experience of the work of art is in itself already a fundamentally relational, political activity.

In the mid 1950s, the Trotskyist activist and art critic Mário Pedrosa discerned in the ostensibly apolitical forms of geometric abstraction the potential trigger for a “revolution of sensibility.”<sup>17</sup> His abandonment of a politically engaged social realist project and unrelenting support of the Concretist avant-garde in the 1950s has its roots in this understanding of the revolutionary power of form. Albeit not primarily through the judgment of beauty, Pedrosa regarded the contemplative experience of the work of art as the basis of the “deepest and most permanent revolution,” which could “reach the core of the individual.”<sup>18</sup> His embrace of this apparently apolitical art was political through and through, foreshadowing, at times, Adorno’s claim that “politics has

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. (Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 1984).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Jacques Rancière, *Malaise dans l’esthétique* [Aesthetics and its Discontents] (Paris: Galilée, 2004). See also Jacques Rancière, “The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes” in *New Left Review* 14 (March – April 2002), pp. 133-151.

<sup>16</sup> Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents,” in *Artforum* (February 2006), p. 184.

<sup>17</sup> Mário Pedrosa, *Política das Artes: Textos Escolhidos I* [The Politics of Art: Selected Texts I]. Ed. Otilia Arantes. (São Paulo: EDUSP, 1995), p. 98.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

migrated into the autonomous work of art, and it has penetrated most deeply into works that present themselves as politically dead.”<sup>19</sup> Yet, this inherent political potential, which Pedrosa recognized in abstract painting, was fundamentally a mediated one, conditioned by the structure of subjectivity. The politics of abstraction was also, to some extent, an abstraction of politics.

What the 1960s generation most emphatically undermined was this mediated character of the aesthetic experience of the work of art. The negation of the autonomy of art by the avant-garde did not inaugurate the possibility of politically concerned art. Contrary to Peter Bürger’s claim, what distinguishes the avant-garde from aestheticism is not “the attempt to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art.”<sup>20</sup> Such an attempt, as Rancière rightly observes, is already present (although ambiguously) in the aesthetic regime itself. When artists and critics in the 1960s reinstated the historical avant-gardes’ negation of artistic autonomy, what was at stake was the possibility of a different mode of political intervention through art, no longer mediated by the mechanism of aesthetic judgment; and they accomplished this by undermining the core of aesthetic experience itself, that is, the spectator’s contemplative distance towards the work of art. When Oiticica defines the program of “anti-art” on the basis of a new position of the artist, “no longer as a creator for contemplation, but as an instigator for creation,”<sup>21</sup> or when Akasegawa proposes to do art “in secret”<sup>22</sup> in the streets of Tokyo in order to prevent the public from taking the position of spectators, it is this radical rejection of contemplation that is at work. This

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<sup>19</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*. Vol. 2. Trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson. (New York: Columbia U Press, 1992), p. 93-4.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Trans. Michael Shaw. (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 49.

<sup>21</sup> Hélio Oiticica, “Position and Program” in *Conceptual Art: a Critical Anthology*. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Akasegawa Genpei, *Tokyo Mikisā Keikaku [Tokyo Mixer Plan]* (Tokyo: Chikuma Bunko, 1984).

rupture of the aesthetic frame that mediated between art and society is what Miyakawa Atsushi described as anti-art's "descent to the everyday,"<sup>23</sup> the avant-garde's plot of a nameless and unframed artistic practice.<sup>24</sup>

Thierry de Duve argues for the possibility of a recuperation of the Kantian aesthetic judgment within the context of contemporary art through the substitution of the original Kantian statement "this is beautiful" by the modern statement "this is art."<sup>25</sup> According to de Duve, the crucial transformation brought about by the Duchampian ready-made is a radical shift from the judgment of beauty to a judgment of artistic identity itself. However, for art that seeks to exist nameless and unframed, perhaps judgment itself, rather than its content, is the problem. Indeed, the statement "this is art" is precisely what forecloses the possibility of art outside the frame. Compelling as it is, de Duve's analysis leaves out the problem concerning the condition of possibility of judgment itself, that is, the contemplative distance between the spectator and the work of art; once that distance is abolished, judgment is literally out of the question. De Duve's reading of Duchamp seems to follow Joseph Kosuth's assessment according to which "The 'value' of particular artists after Duchamp can be weighed according to how much they questioned the nature of art; which is another way of saying 'what they *added* to the conception of art' or what wasn't there before they started."<sup>26</sup> However, what if, instead of Kosuth, we read the significance of Duchamp's 1917 *Fountain* with Akasegawa, as an ephemeral "liberation of the urinal

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<sup>23</sup> Miyakawa Atsushi, "Han-geijutsu: sono nichijō-sei e no kakō [Anti-Art: Its descent to the everyday]" in *Bijutsu techō*, no. 234 (April 1964); reprinted in Miyakawa Atsushi, *Miyakawa Atsushi chosakushū* [*Selected Writings by Miyakawa Atsushi*], vol. 2. (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppan-sha, 1980), pp. 87-96.

<sup>24</sup> For the relationship between the canvas frame and the framework of aesthetic theory, see also Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*. Trans. Geoff Benington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>25</sup> Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), p. 302.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy" in *Conceptual Art: a Critical Anthology*, Eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, p. 164.



from its function in the toilet” into the free space of the museum, where it has no function at all?<sup>27</sup> And what if the enlargement of the conception of art to incorporate the readymade (and thus to give it a function in the museum) is the end of this liberating instant?

In many ways, the conceptual practices of New York-based artists in the late 1960s and the critical discourse around them still frame our current perceptions of sixties art in a global scale. Since Lucy Lippard and John Chandler’s paradigmatic formulation of the “dematerialization of the art object”<sup>28</sup> in conceptual art, much has been said about a generalized tendency towards dematerialization within the art of the 1960s.<sup>29</sup> Yet, for a number of artists in contexts as diverse as those of Brazil and Japan, it was rather an emphasis on materiality that set the tone for artistic practice since the mid-1950s. In his 1956 *Gutai Art Manifesto*, Yoshihara Jirō called for an art in which “matter is not assimilated by the spirit” and “the spirit does not force matter into submission.”<sup>30</sup> Even before Yoshihara, leftist critics in post-occupation Japan embraced the central role of matter in French *Informel* painting as pointing to the possibility of a new Marxist aesthetics in opposition to the idealist primacy of form.

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Akasegawa Genpei, “Stalin ikō no obu je [The *objet* after Stalin]” in *Obu je wo motta musansha [An objet-carrying proletarian]* (Tokyo: Gendai Shichosha, 1970), p. 69.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, “The Dematerialization of Art” in *Conceptual Art: a Critical Anthology*, pp. 46-51.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*, exhibition catalogue, (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), pp. 127-139. For a critical appraisal of the question of materiality and “dematerialization” within the context of North American and European art in the 1960s see also Michael Newman, “The Material Turn in the Art of Western Europe and North America in the 1960s” in *Beyond Preconceptions: the sixties experiment*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Independent Curators International, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> Yoshihara Jirō, “Gutai bijutsu sengen [Gutai Art Manifesto]” in Hirai Shōichi, *Gutai tte nanda? [What is Gutai?]* (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppansha, 2004), p. 84.

Meanwhile, Concrete poetry in Brazil strived to shed light on the material basis of verbal communication. In 1950s Rio de Janeiro, the Neoconcrete experiments with the materiality of writing and reading blurred the limits between poetry and the visual arts. This turn to materiality within a wide range of artistic practices prepared the way for some of the radical transformations of art in the following decade.

The story that follows is one of ruptures and transformations of art circa 1960, brought about by the decisive interventions of a few artists, critics and poets. It is neither a survey of avant-garde art in Brazil and Japan, nor a comparison of two national contexts of artistic production. The narrative follows the traces of a certain discursive continuity, which crosses the borders of these two disparate realms of avant-garde art. Although the parallel developments of art in Europe, North America and elsewhere during the same period are beyond the immediate scope of the present analysis, this twofold perspective on the context of avant-garde art circa 1960 shall illuminate important aspects of their transnational backdrop. The first chapter explores the ostensible fractures and some often misleading similarities between the discourse of avant-garde art in postwar Brazil and Japan, and elaborates on the meanings of what I call their fundamental contemporaneity. Each of the following chapters focuses on a different moment of this history through the exploration of the works of one or more individuals; their sequence coincides in part with the general chronology of events, but their division is primarily a function of the logical order of the argument.

## CHAPTER 1

### AVANT-GARDE AND CONTEMPORANEITY

(cinetheater noh / psicosect-designed by sousândrade  
with ideogramic script by eisenstein):

where you read *hagoromo*, read instead *parangolé*  
where you see *mount fuji*, see instead *hillside of*  
*mangueira*

the parangorome

pluriplumes

heliexcels

helliphant

cellucinary

until

dissolskying itself

in the sky

of skies

Haroldo de Campos, "Paraphernalia for Hélio Oiticica"<sup>31</sup>

The advanced, forward-leaning temporality implied in the very idea of the avant-garde seems to contradict the condition of supposedly peripheral cultures, condemned to permanently lag behind the metropolitan centers of the "West" or the "developed world." Underlying this apparent dilemma is a certain understanding of the relationship between center and periphery, between "the West and the rest" in

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<sup>31</sup> Haroldo de Campos, "Paraphernalia for Hélio Oiticica" Part 4. Trans. Micaela Kramer, *Novas. Selected Writings Haroldo de Campos*. Eds. Antonio Sergio Bessa and Odile Cisneros (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), p. 120.

terms of their belonging to different temporal spheres, not very different from what Johannes Fabian denounced as the “allochronic discourse”<sup>32</sup> of anthropology.

The plot of this allochronic understanding of cultural differences is not new. It has haunted the discipline of comparative literature for a long time with its framework of sources and influences, canons and deviations. As Silviano Santiago remarks, “The dominated culture’s products are always belated, towed along by the colonialist machine of yesterday and the capitalist neocolonialism of today.”<sup>33</sup> Yet, what allochronism conceals is precisely the fundamental temporality of both colonialism and neocolonialism as transnational processes of economic and cultural exchange, a time shared between metropole and colony, developed and underdeveloped. This shared time, this contemporaneity, is itself the condition of possibility of copy and influence, repetitions and deviations.

Underneath the shades of allochronic discourses, this chapter explores the traces of the fundamental contemporaneity between the contexts of avant-garde art in Brazil and Japan.

### **Belatedness**

The title of Ferreira Gullar’s 1969 essay *Avant-garde and Underdevelopment* suggests a contradiction between advanced, “cutting edge” forms of artistic production and the reality of an underdeveloped country, defined by its archaic social and economic relations and its belated position in capitalist modernity. It insinuates the conflict between a quintessentially modern cultural formation originating in the metropolitan centers of Europe and North America and the characteristically

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. Fabian, *Time and the Other*, p. 32.

<sup>33</sup> Silviano Santiago, *Space In-between: Essays on Latin American Culture*. Trans. Ana Lucia Gazzola (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 60.

peripheral, post-colonial reality of poverty and backwardness. Most importantly, this contradiction is expressed in the title *Avant-Garde and Underdeveloped as a temporal paradox*. Each of the terms defines the cultural, social and economic in terms of opposite poles in a temporal scheme: the advanced, forward position of the avant-garde, on the one hand, and the belatedness of underdevelopment on the other. Their combination seems thus to pose a problem for the very scheme under which their temporality is comprehended, namely the linear, universal time of development and modernization.

Gullar published *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment* in the immediate aftermath of the infamous Fifth Institutional Act, which dissolved the National Congress of Brazil, suspended the Constitution, and initiated the harshest period of censorship and police repression of the military dictatorship then in power since 1964. The essay presents a retrospective theoretical reflection on two decades of avant-garde art in Brazil, by an author who had been at times one of its most active participants and, at others, one of the fiercest critics of the Brazilian avant-gardes. Gullar's role as a critic and theoretician, working together with artists such as Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape and Hélio Oiticica, had been crucial in the formation of the Neoconcrete movement in Rio de Janeiro in the late 1950s. It was Gullar's polemic rupture with the theoretical framework of the São Paulo Concretist group in 1959 that officially marked the beginning of Neoconcretism. By the time of *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment*, however, Gullar had long since exchanged the role of poet and theoretician for more immediate modes of political activism, through the Popular Culture Centers and as a member of the Brazilian Communist Party since 1964. The essay displays through and through the mark of this split perspective.

Although in a somewhat different tone from that of his writings of the late 1950s, the target of Gullar's harshest criticism in 1969 was once again the Concretist

orthodoxy from São Paulo, particularly the poets Décio Pignatari, Haroldo and Augusto de Campos. Gullar blames the Concretists for the distinctly formalist tendencies of the Brazilian avant-garde, and for downplaying the political and historically localized elements in their introduction of European authors to the Brazilian public. “[T]he reception of avant-garde authors in Brazil,” he argues, “suffered a comprehensible deformation, determined above all by a scheme that attempted to justify poetic Concretism. Everything that in Joyce and Pound, for instance, was a function of the particularity of those authors, of their connection to a national or cultural problematic of the time they lived and created, has been repeatedly omitted.”<sup>34</sup> The goal, he explained, “was to present the course of art as a linear development, fatal and historically unconditioned ... as if the artistic process constituted a history apart, disconnected from the general history of men.”<sup>35</sup> The universalism of Concrete poetry, which enabled the emergence of an international poetic avant-garde in 1950s São Paulo is thus explained as the result of a purging of the complex circumstances of poetic creation, in the name of a history of the evolution of forms, carefully elaborated to reach its apex in Concrete poetry itself. This elaboration of a Concretist canon demanded not only a careful selection of authors and works, but also a “selection within the selection,” through which those works were reduced to the “strict aspects that interested their theorization as ‘avant-garde’,”<sup>36</sup> ignoring thereby the local realities and political circumstances that constituted the specific background of artistic creation.

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<sup>34</sup> Ferreira Gullar, *Vanguarda e Subdesenvolvimento* [*Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment*], p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

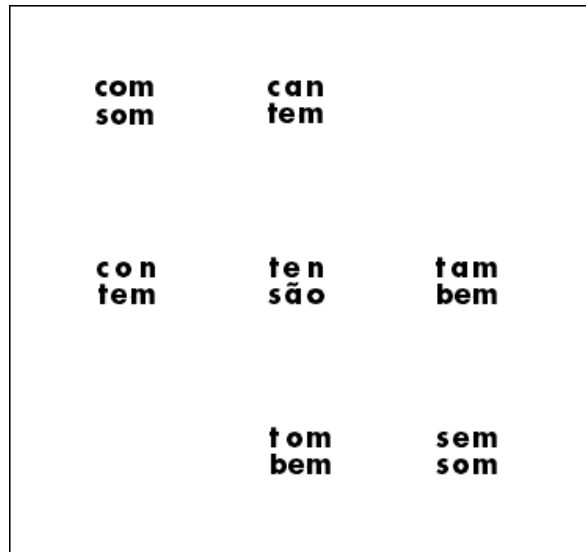


Figure 108. Augusto de Campos, *Tensão* (Tension), 1956

However, within this relentless search for formal innovation that characterized the Brazilian postwar avant-gardes, a crucial aspect emerges, which concerns the very temporality of underdevelopment. “Those ‘vanguards’,” Gullar acknowledges, “brought with them, even if in a misguided manner, the question of the *new*, and this is an essential question for underdeveloped nations. The need for transformation is a radical necessity in a society dominated by misery, and when one knows that misery is a product of archaic structures.”<sup>37</sup> Even if we blame the developed countries for our misery, he continues, “and if we see in [their] superiority the sign of an injustice, we cannot fool ourselves about the fact that we cannot remain as we are, and that we are ‘condemned to civilization’.”<sup>38</sup> From the perspective of underdevelopment, the new is, therefore, an inherent necessity.

The dilemma consists in that, while the “old” – the legacy of the colonial past – is characterized by misery and subjugation, the postcolonial present is still dominated by those very same forces that bring the “new” in the postcolonial present.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

“We need the industry and the know-how that they have,” writes Gullar, “but with that know-how, which we need in order to free ourselves, comes also the domination.”<sup>39</sup> Because “imperialism is at the same time the old and the new,” the “new,” that is, the modern is “for us, always, at the same time, freedom and subjugation.”<sup>40</sup> The dilemma of postcolonial underdevelopment consists thus in a sort of temporal conflict, according to which the “new” of development and modernization is revealed in its identity with the “old” of colonialism. This understanding of the relationship between center and periphery in terms of their belonging to different temporal spheres determined the cultural and aesthetic realms as much as the social and economic spheres.

Gullar’s understanding of the unequal relationship between center and periphery is not unrelated to the strong criticism of depoliticized conceptions of underdevelopment that drove the emergence of Dependency Theory in 1960s Latin America. As the literary critic Roberto Schwarz observes, “the discussion of underdevelopment acquired at that point an unheard of contemporaneity, which opened new perspectives to opposition thinkers also in the developed world.”<sup>41</sup> A comparable process of critical revision of the position of the cultural periphery was taking place in the fields of economics and sociology and in the works of avant-garde artists and critics.

However, while shedding light on the fundamental contradiction of the temporality of underdeveloped modernity, Gullar refuses to let go of the time-scheme of modernization and development theory. He understands that temporal paradox as a sort of antinomy of avant-garde and (or within) underdevelopment, rather than as a

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Roberto Schwarz, “Um Seminário de Marx [A Marx Seminar]” in *Sequências Brasileiras [Brazilian Sequences]* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999), p. 100.



prompt to rethink the linear temporal scheme that grounds both notions, of avant-garde and underdevelopment. This is why, after all, he can still maintain that “Roughly speaking, we are the past of the developed countries and they are the ‘mirror of our future’.”<sup>42</sup> Gullar’s conclusion that “the true artistic avant-garde in an underdeveloped country is that which, searching for the new, searches for the liberation of man from its concrete, international and national situation” falls short of addressing the actual problem. His main argument, that the “European conceptions of avant-garde” are not adequate for the reality of an underdeveloped country, fails to question the basic understanding of time that grounds such conceptions in any context, thereby leaving intact the very notion of the avant-garde in its complicity with the linear time of development and modernization. In contrast to the contradictory character of the Brazilian Concretist avant-garde, Gullar implicitly posits the original European avant-gardes as models of authenticity. The relationship between center and periphery is still understood on the basis of their different stages in a scheme of uneven development, and the time of the periphery still conceptualized as a particular, anomalous and belated time in relation to the center.

### **The Closed Circle**

Among critical discourses on the Japanese postwar avant-gardes, the mobilization of conceptions of time and the claim of a particular mode of temporality for the national art-historical context has also played a crucial role. One can find a seminal moment of this mobilization of time in a 1973 essay by “non-artist” Hikosaka Naoyoshi, which bears the suggestive title “Beyond the Closed Circle. What After the

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<sup>42</sup> Ferreira Gullar, *Vanguarda e Subdesenvolvimento* [*Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment*], p. 8.

Trace of Gutai?”<sup>43</sup> Hikosaka’s text describes the course of Japanese avant-garde art since the Gutai group’s first exhibition in 1955 as a “closed circle” of periodic repetitions of the same recurrent motif. The argument is made more dramatic by the attribution of a geographic location to this circular temporality, connecting its beginning in Gutai’s hometown Ashiya with its completion in Group I’s 1965 hole-digging event in the neighboring city of Kobe. However, as the narrative develops, Hikosaka locates the final closure of this circle in 1970, with the Tokyo based collective Mono-ha, and more precisely with Lee U-fan’s theorization of Sekine Nobuo’s *Phase Earth*.<sup>44</sup>



Figure 109 Shiraga Kazuo, *Please Come in*, “Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun,” Ashiya, 1955

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<sup>43</sup> Hikosaka Naoyoshi, “Tojirareta enkan no kanata wa. ‘Gutai’ no kiseki kara nani wo... [Beyond the Closed Circle. What after the Trace of Gutai?]” in *Bijutsu techō*, no. 227 (August 1973), pp. 72-92.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Lee Ufan, “Sonzai to mu wo koete: Sekine Nobuo-ron [Beyond Being and Nothingness: on Sekine Nobuo]” in *Deai wo motomete: gendai bijutsu no shigen [In Search of Encounter: the Origin of Contemporary Art]* (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppan-sha, 2000), pp. 105-156.

According to Hikosaka, the Japanese postwar avant-garde begins with the destruction of the paradigm of *poiesis* provoked by Gutai's transformation of the productive act into a goal in itself, that is, its "self-teleologization" (*jiko-mokuteki-ka*). Shiraga Kazuo's 1955 performance *Challenging Mud* epitomizes this self-teleologization of the productive (poetic) act. From that point, Hikosaka writes, "the material outcome previously called work, the activity called production, the environment in which the work was placed and the thinking which was until then no more than 'conception',"<sup>45</sup> acquired independent status and developed in different ways through the numerous experiments of the Japanese avant-gardes until the early 1970s.



Figure 110. Shiraga Kazuo, *Challenging Mud*, "First Gutai Art Exhibition," Ohara Kaikan, Tokyo, 1955

The importance of Group I's 1965 *Hole* consisted, according to Hikosaka, in having completed this cycle, by turning the self-teleological productive activity into a mode of *praxis*. The works and theories of Mono-ha shared with its predecessors the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

transformation of artistic production (which within the paradigm of *poiesis* was nothing else than a means) into its own goal, and a relationship with matter based on the unconscious character of that activity.<sup>46</sup> This unconscious relationship to matter, he notes, was the condition of possibility of the liberation of matter from the domain of spirit, proposed by Yoshihara Jirō in the 1956 “Gutai Manifesto.”<sup>47</sup> However, Hikosaka argues, while “Shiraga’s ‘action’ (*akushon*) destroyed *poiesis* by turning the productive act into a goal in itself,” Sekine’s ‘gesture’ (*shigusu*), on the contrary, reestablished the poetic character of that self-teleological activity.<sup>48</sup> Sekine’s repetition of Shiraga’s inaugural act (or Lee Ufan’s interpretation of Sekine) represents thus, for Hikosaka, a step back in relation to Gutai, rather than a move beyond the closed circle of Japanese avant-garde art since 1955.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>47</sup> Yoshihara Jirō, “Gutai bijutsu sengen [Gutai Art Manifesto]” in *Geijutsu shinchō* (December 1956); reprinted in Hirai Shōichi, *Gutai tte nanda? [What is Gutai?]* (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppansha, 2004), pp. 82-87.

<sup>48</sup> Hikosaka Naoyoshi, “Tojirareta enkan no kanata wa. ‘Gutai’ no kiseki kara nani wo... [Beyond the Closed Circle. What after the Trace of Gutai?],” p. 91.



Figure 111. Group I, *Hole*, Gifu Independent Art Festival, Gifu, 1965

The essay concludes with an open question: “Now, in 1973, what has become possible for us since Group I?” In other words: have we been able to go beyond the “closed circle” and recuperate the linear course of historical development? One could locate Hikosaka’s implicit answer in his own proposal for a radical suspension of creative activity, discussed in the 1974 volume *Repetition (Hanpuku)* in explicit debate with Lee Ufan’s theories of Mono-ha.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Hikosaka Naoyoshi. *Hanpuku. Shinkō geijutsu no isō* [*Repetition/Reversion. The Topology of New Art*] (Tokyo: Tabata shoten, 1974).



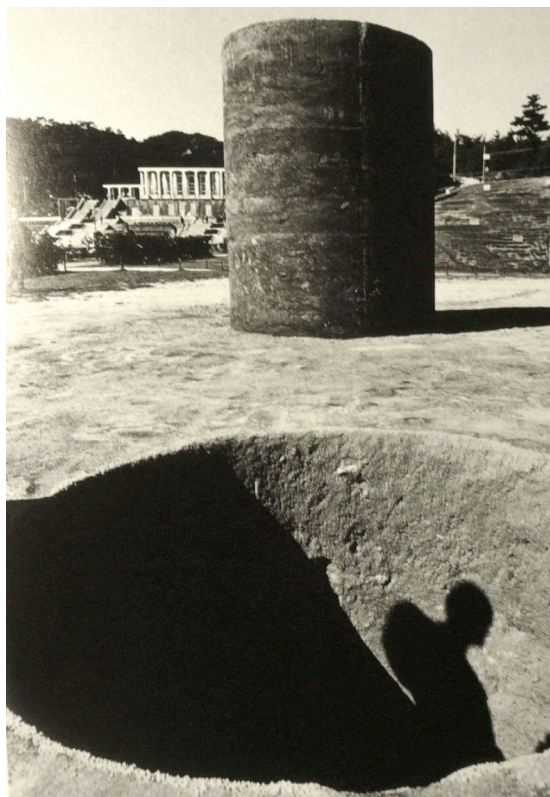


Figure 112. Sekine Nobuo, *Phase Earth*, 1968

Taking the cue from Hikosaka's essay, Chiba Shigeo's *History of the Deviation of Contemporary Art*<sup>50</sup> establishes in the so-called "non-art" activities of Bikyōtō REVOLUTION Committee in the early 1970s (of which Hikosaka was one of the founding members) the actual transition into *praxis*, and describes the period between Gutai and Mono-ha as a pre-history of *praxis*. Through this maneuver, Chiba avoids the closed temporality of the circle and thus constructs a linear narrative of postwar Japanese art – even if its development is characterized as a "history of deviation" or a "deviated history."

Sawaragi Noi, on the other hand, who does not attribute particular significance to the activities of Hikosaka's Bikyōtō, denounced the attempt to construct an

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<sup>50</sup> Chiba Shigeo, *Gendai bijutsu itsudatsu shi* [*History of the Deviation of Contemporary Art*] (Tokyo: Shōbunsha, 1986).

authentic history (*seishi*) of contemporary art in Japan as an utterly impossible endeavor. In Sawaragi's 1998 bestseller *Japan Contemporary Art*,<sup>51</sup> Hikosaka's *topos* of the closed circle acquires the status of an overarching description, not only of the course of Japanese avant-garde art since 1955, but of the temporality of postwar Japan as a whole. Rather than a history of deviation, he claims in reference to Chiba's expression, the closed circle of Japanese contemporary art is the symptom of a "deviation from history." Sawaragi describes contemporary Japan – or rather the Japanese contemporary (*Nihon no gendai*) – as "a 'place' without history" (*rekishi-naki 'basho'*). And one must not overlook the quotation marks around the word "place." In fact, Sawaragi's ambiguous but implicit reference to Nishida Kitarō's concept of "place" in his description of Japan as a "place" deviated from history recycles a familiar *topos* of Japanese 1980s postmodernist discourse.<sup>52</sup> It is remarkable how well received was Sawaragi's recycling of this old discursive strategy as an interpretive key to the context of Japanese contemporary art in the late 1990s.

In *Japan Contemporary Art*, the closed circle describes no longer merely the inherent course of avant-garde art, but determines the whole cultural sphere (including art itself, understood as an "expressive activity"). Sawaragi locates the ultimate ground

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<sup>51</sup> Sawaragi Noi, *Nihon. Gendai. Bijutsu [Japan, Contemporary, Art]* (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1998).

<sup>52</sup> Asada Akira illustrates this mobilization of Nishida's concept of "place" in overarching explanations of a whole range of social, cultural and economic phenomena in 1980s Japan in his contribution to the volume *Postmodernism and Japan*. Cf. Asada Akira, "Infantile Capitalism and Japan's Postmodernism: A Fairy Tale" in Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian, eds. *Postmodernism and Japan* (Durham: Duke U Press, 1989), p. 276. For Nishida's discussion of *basho*, cf. Nishida Kitarō, "Hataraku mono kara miru mono he [From Acting to Seeing]," "Basho [Place]," and "Mu no jikaku-teki gentei [The Self-Conscious Determination of Nothingness]" in *Nishida Kitarō tetsugaku ronshū v. 1*, (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1987).

for the circular temporality of contemporary Japan in the country's situation within the postwar dynamics of international politics:

The fact is that, having lost the war against the United States, by accepting the 'peace constitution' Japan was not only forced to disarm but also semi-permanently deprived of its right of access in a 'history' called world history under the bipolar rule of the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Again, one must not forget that the closed and homogenous space isolated from history that was made possible by this situation constituted the driving force behind the miraculous economic growth that followed.<sup>53</sup>

The peaceful, homogenous, and isolated "place" of contemporary Japan is grounded, according to Sawaragi, on a fundamental violence, namely the American postwar occupation of Japan. Quoting novelist Murakami Ryū's recollections of a childhood under the shadow of American military presence in the vicinity of Sasebo Naval Base, Sawaragi confesses a certain jealousy regarding the writer's intimate experience of what he calls the "origin of the postwar."<sup>54</sup> In contrast to Murakami, for most Japanese, Sawaragi himself included, that fundamental violence remained hidden, while silently determining their existence through and through.

The fact that the "peaceful violence" of American Occupation covers, in its turn, the less peaceful violence of Japanese colonialism in Asia does not become an issue in Sawaragi's narrative of the postwar. Through this insistent remembrance of defeat grounded on the equally persistent forgetfulness of Japan's imperialist past, Sawaragi obstinately chooses to dwell within and reinforce the closed circle of *gendai*. In fact, his response to Hikosaka's question concerning the possibility of going beyond the "closed circle" consists in affirming that what is important is not so much to go beyond, but to acknowledge its inexorability. "I do not propose to force open the violence of this 'closed circle' with further violence" in view of a return to "history in

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<sup>53</sup> Sawaragi, *Nihon. Gendai. Bijutsu* [*Japan, Contemporary, Art*], p. 24.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.



the prewar sense” as would be the position of neoconservatism, he argues.<sup>55</sup> What is necessary is rather to recognize (*ninshiki suru*) this vicious circle of violence that inexorably determines the Japanese *gendai*, and invent new forms of existence within it.

Despite the grammatical ambiguity of its title, Sawaragi’s *Japan Contemporary Art* implies a clear order of determination between its terms: it is thus the “place” (Japan) that determines the circular temporality of *gendai*, which, in its turn, determines art (as well as other forms of expressive activity). Under such circumstances, the *internal* contemporaneity of the Japanese *gendai* is absolute, and pervades the whole realm of discursive practices.

Moreover, this internal contemporaneity is not only ontological, but also of a moral, prescriptive nature. This can be seen most clearly in Sawaragi’s discussion of Japan’s “strange (*kimyō-na*) avant-garde.”<sup>56</sup> In brief, the strangeness of the Japanese avant-garde consisted, for him, precisely in ignoring its origin in the closed circle of Japanese *gendai* and attempting instead to be contemporaneous with the outside world. Of course, according to Sawaragi’s scheme, the European (and North-American) avant-gardes (before and after the war) were never confronted by such an impasse, since their genuine impulse to advance and overcome the present expressed a historical temporality that continued to follow its course.

### **Contemporaneity**

Unsuitable, according to Ferreira Gullar, to the reality of an underdeveloped country like Brazil, where, as Haryū summarized, it penetrated the big cities, “a sort of

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., pp. 28-33.

border zone between the national and international reality,<sup>57</sup> but was unable to reach further into the countryside, the idea of avant-garde is described by Sawaragi as inadequate also to the circular temporality of contemporary Japan. At work in both cases, is an understanding of the local, national context in terms of a particular temporal sphere, constructed by comparison with the “normal,” standard temporality of the “West,” or the “developed world.” The construction of a belated time of underdevelopment, on the one hand, and of a circular time of contemporary Japan, on the other, fail to question the very constitution of the universal temporality of the “West” in relation to which both particular temporalities are implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) understood. Moreover, through a mechanism not unrelated to what Johannes Fabian described as the “denial of coevalness” in anthropological writing, what is erased in this conflation of cultural and geographic differences with temporal discrepancies (by no means limited to the discourse of Brazilian and Japanese avant-garde art) is transnational contemporaneity itself as the actual time of commerce and migration, imperialist rule and dependency, but also as the temporality of cultural translation, the time, for instance, of Haryū Ichirō reading *Avant-garde and Underdevelopment* in Kawasaki.

In fact, the allochronic mapping of cultural differences, according to which different countries or regions are imagined as distinct temporal spheres, denies contemporaneity in more than one sense. Not only does it foreclose the possibility of “coevalness,” that is, of “a common, active ‘occupation’, or sharing, of Time,”<sup>58</sup> but it also disavows contemporaneity as defined by Naoki Sakai, in terms of a participation in the same discourse. In the latter sense, Sakai argues:

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<sup>57</sup> Ferreira Gullar, *Vanguarda e Subdesenvolvimento* [*Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment*], p. 84.

<sup>58</sup> Fabian, *Time and the Other*, p. 31.

[W]orks, institutionalized performances, historical documents, and other utterances are contemporaneous with one another as long as they participate in the same discourse. Hence, even if two works share the same publication date, they cannot be said to be contemporaneous if they are not embedded in the same discourse. Conversely, two utterances could be treated as contemporaneous even if they were produced decades apart from each other.<sup>59</sup>

Contemporaneity as participation in the same discourse does not require coevalness as “common occupation and sharing of time”; it does not even entail synchrony, that is, the simple fact of taking place at the same chronological time defined by years and dates. As Sakai points out, utterances can be contemporaneous with each other even when produced many decades apart. Yet, the common occupation of time, different modes of interaction, communication, translation, constitute important mechanisms for the production of a shared discourse. In this sense, coevalness engenders contemporaneity. Correspondingly, what Fabian terms the denial of coevalness does not necessarily imply the rejection of this sort of discursive contemporaneity, and vice versa. Nonetheless, the allochronic understanding of cultural differences performs a double negation: by denying coevalness, it sanctions and sustains a fundamental disavowal of contemporaneity.

From the point of view of their respective national contexts, the histories of postwar art in Brazil and Japan appear as independent flows, conditioned by their particular internal logics, on the one hand, and by the external influence of the artistic centers and cultural capitals of Europe and North America, on the other. Observed separately, the internal coherence of each of these contexts may present itself in terms of a “history of deviation” (from the implicit Western standard), as the specific dynamic of avant-garde art within underdevelopment, as the “Brazilian constructive project,” as a “closed circle” isolated from history, etc. Yet, when juxtaposed, these

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<sup>59</sup> Naoki Sakai, *Voices of the Past. The Status of Language in Eighteenth-Century Japanese Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p.118.

seemingly independent flows reveal a commonly shared ground; through the cracks of their internal consistency emerge the traces of a fundamental convergence or coherence between these two disparate contexts of artistic practice. This fundamental coherence beneath the ostensible specificities of local circumstances is what I call contemporaneity.<sup>60</sup>

### **The Bow and the Lyre**

In the past few years, the similarity between the names of the Japanese avant-garde collective Gutai Art Association (*Gutai Bijutsu Kyōkai*) and the Brazilian Concretist movement aroused the curiosity of art historians. Gutai and Brazilian Concretism (and Neoconcretism) are the only postwar avant-garde movements from outside Europe and North America included in the recent volume *Art Since 1900*,<sup>61</sup> organized by *October* art theorists Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin Buchloh. Since the Japanese word *gutai* can be translated as “concrete,” the two movements happen to share the same name. This terminological similarity, in addition to their synchronic development, led some to the conclusion that a major conceptual affinity must exist between the two movements. In his 2002 *Dada au*

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<sup>60</sup> Henri Bergson develops a similar concept of contemporaneity in his critique of Einstein’s theory of relativity: “I call ‘contemporaneous’ two fluxes which are, for my consciousness, *one* or *two*, indifferently, which my consciousness perceives together as a unique flow if it wants to give it an undivided act of attention, or which it distinguishes, through and through, if it prefers to divide its attention between them.” Henri Bergson, *Durée et Simultanéité. A propos de la théorie d’Einstein* [*Duration and Simultaneity. Concerning Einstein’s Theory*] (Paris: PUF, 1968), p. 49.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Hal Foster, et al. *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), v. II, pp. 373-78. Although the authors present the two movements under the same rubric and trace a parallel between both in terms of their reinterpretation of European trends outside the United States and Europe, they do not attempt to pursue immediate similarities between them.

*Japon*, Marc Dachy comments on the relationship between Gutai and Brazilian

Concretism:

The same moment in the artistic chronology of the epoch, but most of all the theoretical acuity of the protagonists, the oldest and founder of Gutai, and Haroldo de Campos, at the origin of Brazilian Concrete poetry, do not allow us to remain in the register of pure coincidence. (...)

Innumerable parallels, on the level of theory as of the works could be revealed between Gutai and the Brazilian concreteness, if we wanted to look closely at them.<sup>62</sup>

Yet, looking closely at each of the movements, it is rather the stark contrast, their almost diametrical opposition that is striking. Despite the chronological coincidence and terminological affinities, their actual contemporaneity does not lie so close at hand. Walter Benjamin once wrote that “To encompass both Breton and Le Corbusier (...) would mean drawing the spirit of contemporary France like a bow, with which knowledge shoots the moment in the heart.”<sup>63</sup> Considering the respective origins of Gutai and Concretism within the early twentieth century avant-gardes, their opposition bears more than an analogical relationship to Benjamin’s statement.

In September 1958, the Brazilian critic Mário Pedrosa, temporarily holding a research position at the Tokyo National Museum of Modern Art, attended an exhibition of Gutai paintings curated by the group’s leader, Yoshihara Jirō and the French critic Michel Tapié. Pedrosa’s report on the exhibition to his weekly column in the Rio de Janeiro-based *Jornal do Brasil* sharply illustrates the contrast between Gutai and Brazilian Concretism:

“Now, I want to talk about one of the latest exhibitions I visited so far. Its title: nothing less than “International Art of a New Era: Informel and Gutai.”

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<sup>62</sup> Marc Dachy, *Dada au Japon [Dada in Japan]* (Paris: P.U.F., 2002), p. 120.

<sup>63</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 1999), p. 459.

The exhibition was organized by Mr. Michel Tapié, from Paris. Tapié, as we know, is one of those smart Parisians who, associated with *marchands de tableaux*, invent “isms” and discover “geniuses” every other day, simply because this is their job. The exhibition is composed of three parts: one of Japanese artists, another of North-American artists and another of Europeans. Associated to Mr. Tapié and his “other art” there is a group of young artists, under the leadership of Mr. Jiro Yoshihara, the Group Gutai. Gutai is defined in the dictionary as “concretion” – the word combined to the suffix “teki” means “concrete.” So, Gutai would be a “concretion” but still not “concrete.” One of the exhibition’s critics, from *The Japan Times*, interprets the word as embodiment, which would take us close to “encorpamento,” not to talk of “incorporação” (incorporation), leading us to the idea of a purely commercial and industrial spirit. Be it as it may, Group Gutai has nothing to do with the Concrete group from over there [in Brazil]. They are tachists,<sup>64</sup> and search for purportedly informal origins, rather than attempting to define new structures. The exhibition was the weakest among those I have seen in Tokyo.”<sup>65</sup>

Pedrosa’s approach to Gutai and *Informel* is openly one-sided. Yet, more than a personal opinion, his harsh judgment reflects a broader aesthetic and political project, as well as the radical opposition between geometric and informal abstraction that colored the Brazilian art scene throughout the 1950s. Fernando Cocchiarale and Anna Bella Geiger observe that “The historical fracture between Constructivism and Informalism, whose origins are to be found, on the one hand, in Malevitch and Mondrian and, on the other, in Kandinsky, occurs in Brazil in a more evident mode than in other places.”<sup>66</sup> For politically engaged artists and critics in the postwar, the

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<sup>64</sup> The term “tachism” or “tachisme” (“tachismo” in Portuguese) from the French “tache,” meaning stain, is used in reference to informal abstract painting, frequently with a pejorative connotation.

<sup>65</sup> Mario Pedrosa, “Arte – Japão e Ocidente [Art – Japan and the West]” in *Jornal do Brasil*, 09/17/1958; reprinted in *Modernidade Cá e Lá: Textos Escolhidos 4* [*Modernity Here and There: Selected Texts 4*]. Ed. Otilia Arantes (São Paulo: EDUSP, 2000), p. 311.

<sup>66</sup> Fernando Cocchiarale and Anna Bella Geiger, *Abstracionismo geométrico e informal: A vanguarda brasileira nos anos 50* [*Geometric and Informal Abstractionism: The Brazilian Avant-Garde in the 1950s*] (Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 1987), p. 19.

embrace of Concrete Art and the dismissal of informalist tendencies amounted to a fundamental choice regarding the future of the nation.

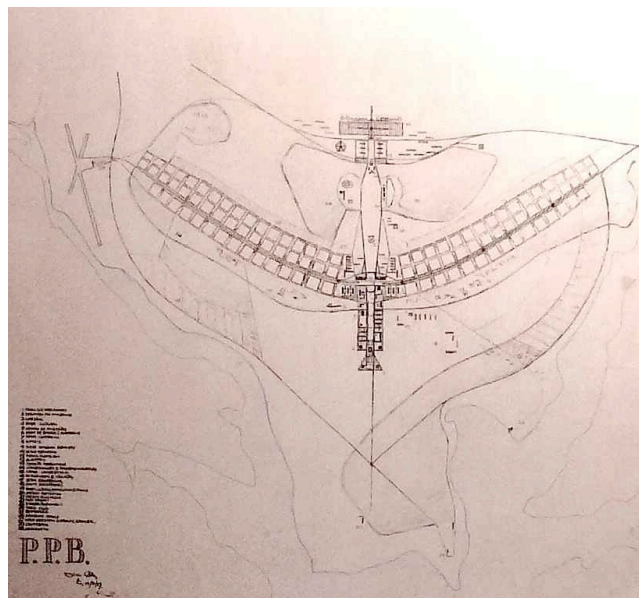


Figure 113. Lucio Costa, Draft for Brasília's *Pilot Plan*, 1957

During the height of industrial development in postwar Brazil, constructivism attained the status of a national aesthetic ideology. While the starting point of Brazilian Concretism has been frequently associated with Max Bill's 1950 exhibition at the São Paulo Modern Art Museum and his prize at the first São Paulo Biennale the following year<sup>67</sup>, those events were in fact part of a longer and more profound process. The origins of the constructivist hegemony in South America can be traced back to at least as early as 1934, when the painter and theorist Joaquín Torres Garcia returned to his hometown Montevideo with the explicit intention to divulge his idea of Constructive Universalism.<sup>68</sup> But it was probably in 1950s Brazil that the

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Hal Foster, et al. *Art after 1900*, p. 376.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Cecilia de Torres, "Montevideo: Constructive Universalism," in *The Geometry of Hope: Latin American Abstract Art from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, exhibition catalogue (Austin: Blanton Museum of Art, 2007).

constructivist utopia came the closest to a wide-reaching ideological consensus.<sup>69</sup> The articulation that led to the construction of Brasília in the late 1950s exemplifies perhaps most cogently the congregating power of constructivism as a political and aesthetic ideology. As Ronaldo Brito puts it, “the Brazilian constructivist avant-garde did not only congregate the educated liberals and cosmopolitans but also the dissidents of the dominant leftist cultural project such as Mário Pedrosa.”<sup>70</sup> Interviewed by Cocchiarale and Geiger in 1980, Pedrosa himself was unambiguous about the political subtext of his adherence to the constructive project in the 1950s:

Geiger/Cocchiarale: This constructive effort would have any relation with the process of industrialization, with Brazilian development in the 1950s?

Pedrosa: Yes, there was this commitment. Art is something optimistic. Brazil is a recently built country, and I thought Concrete Art was what gave it a certain discipline in the level of form. Informalism, on the other hand, was a pessimistic art, very pessimistic, and it reflected what was going on in the world; an art of a wholly subjective, introspective philosophical position. It didn't contain a message, or an attitude that sees further away. It was a scream of the artist, a permanent interjection. It was somehow nice, but that kind of modern art did not carry a worldly, universal message. Or perhaps it was universal to some extent, but lost, with no directive.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> For an overview of the panorama of constructivism in 1950s Brazil, cf. Aracy do Amaral, *Projeto Construtivo Brasileiro na Arte: 1950-62* [Brazilian Constructive Project Project in Art: 1950-1962], exhibition catalogue (Rio de Janeiro: Museu de Arte Moderna, 1977).

<sup>70</sup> Ronaldo Brito, *Neoconcretismo: Vértice e Ruptura do Projeto Construtivo Brasileiro* [Neoconcretism: Peak and Rupture of the Brazilian Constructive Project] (Rio de Janeiro, Funarte, 1985), p. 104.

<sup>71</sup> Mário Pedrosa, Interview. Cocchiarale and Geiger, *Abstracionismo geométrico e informal: A vanguarda brasileira nos anos 50*, p. 107.





Figure 114. Mário Pedrosa between architects Lucio Costa and Affonso Reidy, 1951

In addition to providing a framework for artistic practice and criticism, Constructivism articulated the ideological basis for the establishment of the country's major art institutions. In postwar São Paulo, an alliance between the federal and local governments, the industrial bourgeoisie and the international constructivist avant-garde (stripped of its socialist elements) enabled the institutionalization of modern art. The Italian Brazilian entrepreneur Francisco (Ciccillo) Matarazzo Sobrinho founded the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art in 1948 and established the São Paulo Biennale in 1951. Matarazzo invited the Belgian art critic Léon Degand to direct the newly built museum and to organize its inaugural exhibition. Degand's 1949 curatorial masterpiece, *From Figurativism to Abstractionism*, presented the historical course of modern art as a progressive development, in which geometric abstraction occupied the highest stage, as the accomplished and absolutely modern form of art.

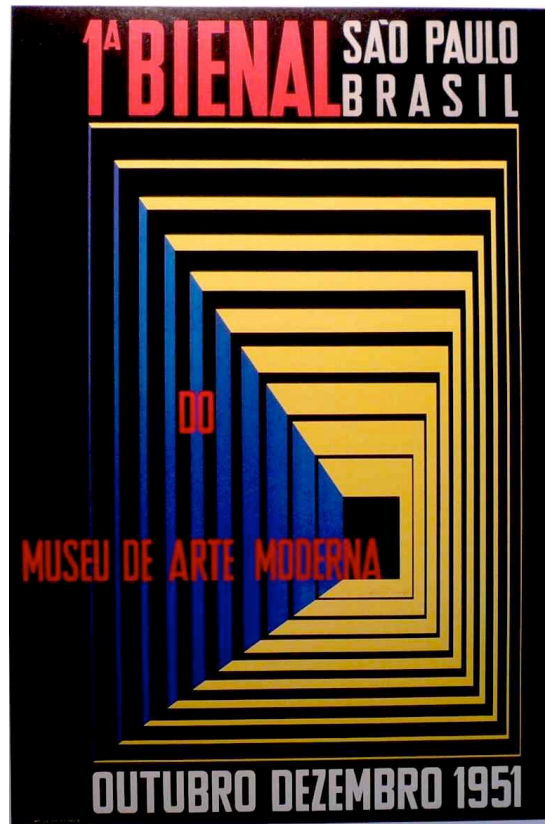


Figure 115. Antonio Maluf, *Poster for the First São Paulo Biennale*, 1951

Not that there were no artists working with the techniques of informal and gestural abstraction in postwar Brazil; on the contrary, particularly towards the late 1950s, informalism was extremely popular among Brazilian painters. Ferreira Gullar, who did not hide his antipathy for the trend, commented that, at a certain point, in the galleries of Rio and São Paulo, “You couldn’t find a single exhibition of figurative art – it was all tachism.”<sup>72</sup> The 5<sup>th</sup> São Paulo Biennale, in 1959, witnessed the apex of what critics deemed the “tachist offensive” in the local art scene. The first prize for Brazilian painting consecrated Japanese-born Manabu Mabe as Brazil’s most prominent informal abstract painter; in November 1959, *Time* magazine celebrated his dramatic life and career in an article entitled “The Year of Manabu Mabe.”<sup>73</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Ferreira Gullar, Interview. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>73</sup> “The Year of Manabu Mabe” in *Time*, November 2, 1959.



Figure 116. Manabu Mabe, *Dream*, 1959

Nonetheless, informal abstraction was unable to shed the stigma of imported fad with no relevance to the local reality and, even more importantly, to articulate its visual production with a coherent theoretical discourse. Printmaker Fayga Ostrower expressed this sense of exclusion of informal abstractionists from mainstream art criticism during the 1950s: “I know the Concretists had their exponents in some art critics, who constructed a whole series of theories around that position, while the same did not happen with informal art. There was not even one critic who really theorized on informal art.”<sup>74</sup> The painter Iberê Camargo, famous for his prewar landscapes of Rio de Janeiro, who turned to informal abstraction in the late 1950s, justified the situation with the claim that “when the critic is engaged, as it was the case of the Concretist movement – without meaning to dismiss the movement of artists themselves – it is criticism that prevails.”<sup>75</sup> Summarizing a widespread opinion,

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<sup>74</sup> Fayga Ostrower, Interview. Cocchiarale and Geiger, *Abstracionismo geométrico e informal: A vanguarda brasileira nos anos 50*, p. 173.

<sup>75</sup> Iberê Camargo, Interview. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

Cocchiarale and Geiger argued that this lack of a theoretical discourse was intrinsic to informal abstraction itself, which resisted any attempt to conceptual systematization: “Informalism did not produce collective discourses because the question of freedom occupies a central place in their action. To systematize it according to principles would hence be deeply contradictory.”<sup>76</sup> Still, more than a characteristic of Informalism and gestural abstraction itself, this view reflects the mode in which both *Informel* and abstract expressionism were translated into the Brazilian artistic context at that time.

Miyakawa Atsushi expresses a similar judgment to Iberê Camargo about the role of criticism in 1950s Japan, observing that “at that time, the critics’ words were granted far greater importance than raw reality.”<sup>77</sup> Yet, in stark contrast to the Brazilian scene, since 1956 it was mainly *Informel* that set the tone of Japanese art critics’ words and interventions. The 1958 exhibition “International Art of a New Era: Informel and Gutai (*Atarashii Kaiga Sekai-ten: Anforumeru to Gutai*),” which stirred Pedrosa’s severe comments, was not an isolated event, but rather the outcome of a long-lasting and decisive collaboration between the Parisian critic Tapié and Gutai leader Yoshihara. In addition, the exhibition is recognized as one of the icons of the so-called “*Informel Typhoon*” (*anforumeru senpu*),<sup>78</sup> which swept over the Japanese art world around the mid 1950s.

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<sup>76</sup> Cocchiarale and Geiger, *Abstracionismo geométrico e informal: A vanguarda brasileira nos anos 50*, p. 20.

<sup>77</sup> Miyakawa Atsushi, “Henbō no suii: Montaju-fu ni [A History of Change: In Montagelike Compilation]” in *Bijutsu techō*, no. 227, supplement issue (October 1963); reprinted in *Miyakawa Atsushi chosakushū* [Selected Writings by Miyakawa Atsushi], vol.II (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppan-sha, 1980), p. 48.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Haryū Ichirō, *Sengo bijutsu seisuishu* [*The Rise and Fall of Postwar Art*] (Tokyo: Tokyo Shoseki, 1979), pp. 100-110.



Figure 117. Michel Tapié and Yoshihara Jirō at the exhibition “International Art of a New Era: Informel and Gutai,” Osaka, 1958; [Left Wall] Jackson Pollock, *Number 8, 1951 Black Flowing*; [Right Wall] Work by Yoshihara Jirō

Since 1952, following the San Francisco Peace Treaty and the regularization of international travel for Japanese citizens, a number of young artists left the country to pursue their studies in France. Among the first to set residence in Paris in 1952 was the painter Imai Toshimitsu, who was soon introduced to Tapié and joined the group of *Informel* painters a few years later. 1952 was also the year of Tapié’s epoch-making exhibition *Signifiant de l’Informel* and of the publication of his essay *Un Art Autre*,<sup>79</sup> which provided the conceptual framework to the *Informel* paintings by Jean Fautrier, Jean Dubuffet, Wols and others whose works Tapié closely followed and publicized since the early 1940s. Almost thirty years older than Imai and familiar with the French art scene since the 1930s, Okamoto Tarō returned to Paris that same year for a solo exhibition. As enthused as his young cohorts about the new trends of French abstract

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<sup>79</sup> Michel Tapié, *Un Art Autre* [*Another Art*] (Paris: Gabriel-Giraud et Fils, 1952).

painting, and actively engaged in the creation of an artistic avant-garde art in Japan, Okamoto set out to bring the exponents of *Art Informel* for an exhibition in Tokyo.

In November 1956, “Art of Today’s World (*Sekai konnichi no bijutsu*)” opened at Takashimaya Department Store in Nihonbashi. Whereas the exhibition comprised a wide range of trends of contemporary painting, it was the works of Tapié’s *Informel* group, exhibited for the first time in Japan, which caused the strongest impact and overturned the local art scene. Haryū recalls that “Particularly the dissolved charcoal, like crushed flesh over the delicate deep green undercoating, the protuberant lump of plaster and the watercolor lines on its surface, faintly suggesting the contours of a face in Fautrier’s ‘Hostage’ series is something I cannot forget.”<sup>80</sup> *Informel* canvases from the wartime and immediate postwar carried the weight of bearing witness to the atrocities of a very recent past, imbued in a cathartic scream of liberation. One can imagine the resonance of such works among a generation of artists and critics struggling to come to terms with Japan’s wartime past while dealing at the same time with the challenges of postwar reconstruction and the suddenly granted freedom of artistic expression.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 102.



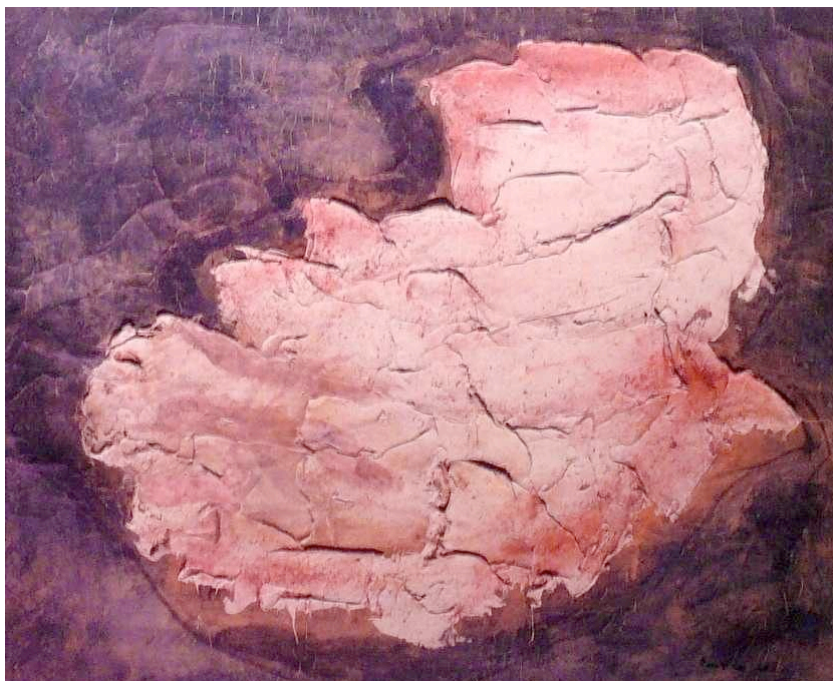


Figure 118. Jean Fautrier, *La Fusillée* (The Gunned-down), 1943

Whereas Tapié himself promoted *Informel* as the authentic expression of French resistance against the Nazi occupation, it was probably in Japan that this association of the painful expressivity of informal abstraction with the experience of World War II became the most determinant. The painter Kusuno Tomoshige, who immigrated to São Paulo in 1960, once referred to a childish (*yōchi*) element in the works of Brazilian abstract painters in comparison to those of their Japanese peers, a quality he attributed precisely to their “lack of experience of the war.”<sup>81</sup> Kusuno argued that the contrast was even clearer when one juxtaposed the works of Japanese painters who immigrated to Brazil before the war, such as Manabu Mabe and Tomie Ohtake, with paintings by those who stayed in Japan: “Mabe’s paintings, as their titles say, are romantic and lyrical. Compared to us, they haven’t lost a certain serenity

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<sup>81</sup> “Nikkei bijutsu-shi gaisetsu [An Outline of Nikkei Art]” in *Burajiru News. Nikkei Shimbun Mail Magazine* n. 25 (January 4, 2004).

(*ooraka-na mono wo ushinateinai*).”<sup>82</sup> Its cathartic relationship with the wartime experience was certainly no minor factor in the long-lasting impact of informal abstraction in the Japanese art scene.

Ostracized in Brazil as a “permanent interjection” of pessimistic individualism (Pedrosa), the *Informel* “scream” was hailed by Japan’s “convalescent avant-garde” (Haryū) as a cathartic cry for liberation. In fact, since the end of the war and the fall of the empire, the question of freedom had understandably occupied the center of artistic discourse in Japan. As early as January 1<sup>st</sup> 1946, the painter Matsumoto Shunsuke was the first to launch a public appeal for the creation of a free artistic establishment, in a self-published article entitled *A Proposal to All Japanese Artists (Zen Nihon bijutsuka ni hakaru)*.<sup>83</sup> When in April 1946 the Japan Art Association (*Nihon bijutsu kai*) was founded with 151 members, its advertising pamphlet claimed that “for the first time in Japanese art history, such a broad group of democratic artists have voluntarily come together and united, overcoming their small differences of political thought and artistic schools.”<sup>84</sup> More than anything else, it was this relentless search for artistic freedom that shaped the two major institutions of Japanese postwar art, the Nihon Independent Exhibition, established in 1947 by the Japan Art Association, and its more experimental counterpart, which functioned as the breeding ground of postwar avant-garde art in Tokyo, the Yomiuri Independent Exhibition (1949-1963).

The liberation Japanese artists aspired to during the postwar years presented itself, from early on, under the guise of a forked path. Kitawaki Noboru’s last and most well-known canvas, the 1949 *Quo Vadis*, remains the most cogent metaphor of

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Haryū, *Sengo bijutsu seisuishu* [*The Rise and Fall of Postwar Art*], pp. 35-39; Mark H. Sandler, “The Living Artist: Matsumoto Shunsuke’s Reply to the State,” in *Art Journal* vol. 55, 1996, pp. 74-82.

<sup>84</sup> Haryū, *Sengo bijutsu seisuishu* [*The Rise and Fall of Postwar Art*], p. 38.



the artistic panorama of Japan's immediate postwar. In its partly Surrealistic, partly socialist realist style, the painting depicts the back of a demobilized soldier standing in the middle of a bare landscape; his half-empty army cloth sack hanging on the shoulder, and the inclination of the head suggesting a gaze that reaches far in the horizon. A few feet ahead, a sign indicates the bifurcation; to the left, an organized multitude marches along raising red flags, on the upper right, clouds, rain and a hardly distinguishable urban landscape. Soon enough, the path of artistic freedom pursued by the Japanese avant-garde would also bifurcate. Until the early 1960s, the distinctive characters of the country's two major annual independent exhibitions, the social realist-oriented Nihon Independent, on the one hand, and the more experimentalist exhibit organized by the Yomiuri Newspaper, on the other, reflected this clear split between two conceptions of the "avant-garde."



Figure 119. Kitawaki Noboru, *Quo Vadis*, 1949

The Japanese reception of *Informel* also carried the traces of such distinct, often conflicting views of the liberating potential of painting. In contrast to the idea of freedom of the subject or individual, as abstract expressionist tendencies were most frequently understood in the United States, Brazil and elsewhere, a number of critics in 1950s Japan perceived in *Informel* painting a radical move to liberate the signifying potential of matter from the domain of subjective expression.<sup>85</sup> For the critical left, this new role of materiality as the central element of artistic practice presented the possibility of a Marxist aesthetics, which rejected the Zhdanovist turn of socialist realism while simultaneously incorporating the newest trends of Western abstract painting. The turn to materiality challenged the idealist primacy of form and spirit in the production of the work of art and brought the promise of an entirely new mode of artistic expression from the dialectic encounter of act and matter.

Yoshihara's claim that in Gutai art "the spirit does not force matter into submission," but rather, when presented as such, "matter starts to tell us something and speaks with a mighty voice" in the 1956 "Gutai Manifesto"<sup>86</sup> constitute, in part, an attempt to respond to and position Gutai amidst the sweeping debates on materiality in the wake of "Art of Today's World."<sup>87</sup> The Manifesto, which claimed to find a "peculiar agreement" between the aspirations of Gutai and those of *Art Informel*,<sup>88</sup> contained no reference to Theo van Doesburg's notion of Concrete Art (*gutai geijutsu*) or, for that matter, to any of the tendencies that composed the Brazilian constructivist

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<sup>85</sup> The emphasis on the importance of the materiality of painting was already present in Tapié's *Un Art Autre*, but its centrality in Japanese art criticism in the late 1950s is unparalleled. Cf. Chapter 3.

<sup>86</sup> Yoshihara, "Gutai bijutsu sengen [Gutai Art Manifesto]," p. 82.

<sup>87</sup> The critic and Gutai specialist Hirai Shōichi speculates that the Gutai Manifesto itself, published more than two years after the foundation of the group, was produced in response to a suggestion of the editor *Geijutsu Shinchō* for Yoshihara to express the group's position in relation to the debates on materiality. Cf. Hirai Shōichi, Personal interview. 15 June 2007.

<sup>88</sup> Yoshihara, "Gutai bijutsu sengen [Gutai Art Manifesto]," p. 82.

canon.<sup>89</sup> In the late 1950s, no other major Japanese avant-garde collective was as influenced by *Informel* as Gutai. Founded in Ashiya in 1954, the group – and Yoshihara more than anyone – resented the lack of attention from the mainstream of art criticism in Tokyo to its early radical experiments.<sup>90</sup> One can say that it was mainly Tapié’s public praise to Gutai since his first visit to Japan that aroused the interest of Tokyo critics in the group. However, as Chiba Shigeo remarks, Tapié’s influence ultimately led Gutai to shift the focus of its artistic practices from its early groundbreaking performances towards the techniques of *Informel* painting.<sup>91</sup> The exhibition “International Art of a New Era: Informel and Gutai” marked the peak of the collaboration between Yoshihara and Tapié and the most *Informel* period of Gutai; under such circumstances, Pedrosa’s severe reaction to Gutai’s paintings in 1958 is hardly surprising.

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<sup>89</sup> Hirai also remarked that in years of research in the Gutai archives he found no written mention of the affinities between their movement and concrete art, neither by members of the group nor by its contemporary critics in Japan. Hirai Shōichi, Personal interview. 15 June 2007.

<sup>90</sup> In an article celebrating the tenth anniversary of Gutai, Yoshihara wrote about the initial reaction of Tokyo critics to their work: “My intention was to offer a fresh, still ripening fruit. However, Japanese critics didn’t seem quite interested in taking a bite of anything unless they had tasted it before.” Yoshihara Jirō, “Gutai Bijutsu no ju-nen [The Ten Years of Gutai Art]” in *Bijutsu Jaanaru*, n. 40. Haryū comments on the episode in *The Rise and Fall of Postwar Art*, and recognizes his share of guilt. Cf. Haryū Ichirō, *Sengo bijutsu seisuishi [The Rise and Fall of Postwar Art]*, pp. 98-99.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Chiba, *Gendai bijutsu itsudatsu shi [History of the Deviation of Contemporary Art]*, p. 27.



Figure 120. Shiraga Kazuo, *Work II*, 1958

The curator Daniel Abadie, who organized in 1984 an exhibition bringing together the artistic repertoires of Michel Tapié and Léon Degand, wrote the following remarks on the opposition between the two critics:

To present together the critical choices of Léon Degand and Michel Tapié in an exhibition representing postwar art may seem paradoxical, as so much seems to set them apart. The rigorous thinking of Léon Degand, his exogenous vision of abstract art, his partiality for an art of rigor and construction are the opposite of Michel Tapié's anarchic temper, of his vision of an art beyond all styles, of his taste for the magic and phantomatic. But between these extremes, as Francis Ponge wrote, "the lyre strains."<sup>92</sup>

While Tapié's *Informel* swept over the Tokyo art world in the mid 1950s, deeply transforming artistic practices and theories, it was categorically rejected in Brazil, where the rigorous forms of Concretism shaped the discourse of art critics.

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<sup>92</sup> Daniel Abadie, *Un Art Autre / Un Autre Art. Les Années 50 [An Art Other / Another Art. The 1950s]*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Artcurial, 1984), p. 3.

Juxtaposed, the artistic contexts of postwar Brazil and Japan illuminate the inherently transnational nature of this fundamental tension of twentieth century art, most often conceived of as a characteristically European or “Western” phenomenon. By the same token, their juxtaposition provides a sort of “stereoscopic”<sup>93</sup> perspective on a history all too frequently flattened by an exclusively European or North American bias.

The fundamental coherence between these disparate artistic contexts is not inscribed on the surface of facts and words; it is neither in the paintings and their stylistic characteristics, nor in the political ideologies attributed to them. In fact, their coherence is not to be found in the works themselves, but rather besides and around them, in the frame that separates and simultaneously connects and articulates the fictional space of art and the “real” world outside. Their contemporaneity consists in a set of common presuppositions about the political potential of art and a certain mode of conceiving the relationship between art and society, in short, in a shared politics of abstraction.

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<sup>93</sup> Walter Benjamin refers to the stereoscope, an eighteenth-century machine that generates three-dimensional images from the juxtaposition of two flat pictures, as a mode of the pedagogical aspect of his historical inquiry in the *Arcades Project*. Quoting Rudolf Borchardt’s writings on Dante, he writes: “To educate the image-making medium within us, raising it to a stereoscopic and dimensional seeing into the depths of historical shadows.” Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 458.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE POLITICS OF ABSTRACTION

The political battles of 1950s art were fought, to a large extent, in the camp of abstract painting. The choice between geometric shapes, stains, or drops of paint on a canvas often carried the weight of a political statement. Yet, the meanings attached to the visual politics of abstract art varied widely under different social and political contexts. Under such circumstances, art critics occupied a strategic position as mediators between the visual and verbal realms; they translated between the apparent universality of the visual and the diverse local dialects of cultural politics. Were it not for the decisive role of critics in providing an aesthetic, theoretical and political framework for postwar abstract painting, *Art Informel* could not have become the painterly expression of the French *Resistance* and Abstract Expressionism could not have possibly reached its international status as a symbol of freedom and of the new American way of life.

In 1950s Brazil, no single figure was more influential in the formation of a local discourse on the political significance of abstract painting than the art critic and Trotskyist militant Mário Pedrosa. As Ronaldo Brito once remarked, “for anyone involved in the Brazilian artistic milieu ... it is impossible to talk about Mário Pedrosa without a certain dose of passion.”<sup>94</sup> More than influencing the agents of Brazilian art, “he infused the circuit with his ideas and positions vis-à-vis the work of art.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ronaldo Brito, “Lições Avançadas do Mestre Pedrosa [Advanced Lessons of Master Pedrosa]” *Experiência Crítica [Critical Experience]* (São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 1999), p. 48.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

Pedrosa's role and legacy as both a left-wing militant and art critic in the political and cultural spheres of twentieth-century Brazilian society is, in many ways, unparalleled.

Nevertheless, the reach and significance of Pedrosa's political and aesthetic thinking has not yet been duly acknowledged outside the realms of art criticism and history of Marxism. Perhaps because his understanding of history never lent itself to the construction of national myths of Brazilian exceptionalism, Pedrosa failed to join the ranks of intellectuals such as Sergio Buarque de Holanda, Gilberto Freyre and even Oswald de Andrade, whose influence is recognized and revered across disciplinary boundaries. Ironically, Pedrosa's archive in the National Library at Rio de Janeiro is currently divided between his writings on politics and his art-critical production. Yet, it is precisely his ability to bring together both realms, his powerful insights into the political role and significance of art that constitutes a legacy, whose reach beyond the scope of professional art criticism remains to be recognized as an important moment of twentieth century political thought.

This chapter examines Pedrosa's discourse on geometric abstraction against the background of his political and intellectual itinerary and of the development of his art-critical stance since the 1930s. Pedrosa's position as an art critic in the post-World War II period was marked by relentless commitment to the political significance of some of the most formally innovative, experimental trends of painting and sculpture. A champion of social realism in the 1930s, he turned to geometric abstraction in the postwar, becoming the most important theoretician of the Concretist avant-garde in Rio de Janeiro in the 1950s. At that point, Pedrosa rejected painterly realism as inevitably anachronistic, and embraced geometric abstraction as the aesthetic principle of a "revolution of sensibility." By doing so, his theoretical considerations anticipate some of the central debates on the political potential of art of the early twenty first century.

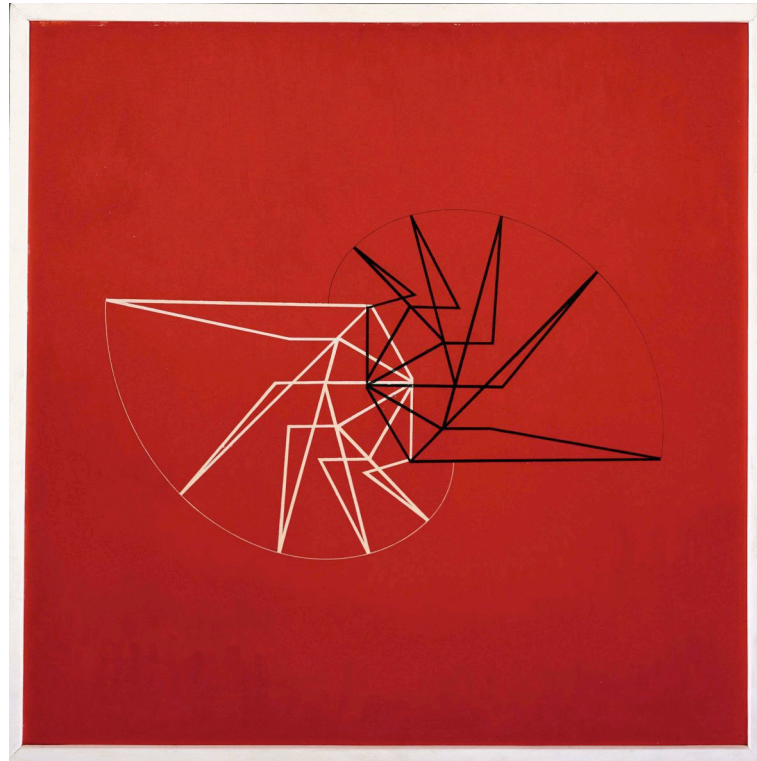


Figure 121. Waldemar Cordeiro, *Visible Idea*, 1956

Pedrosa's aesthetic project must be understood within the context of a broader political endeavor. To some extent, art criticism itself was for him, from the outset, an extension of political militancy; or rather, it was a search for alternative and more effective modes of intellectual intervention in politics. His turn to abstract painting in the postwar can be thus understood as an almost natural development of this search for the specific mechanism through which art is able to affect social transformation. In the pages that follow, I contextualize and discuss Pedrosa's conceptualization of the transformative power of art within a long-lasting search for a revolutionary aesthetics.

### **The intellectual as revolutionary**

“To be a revolutionary is the natural calling of an intellectual. (...) I always thought that the revolution is the deepest of all activities. (...) I always dreamt of a



revolution for Brazil. (...) The situation is dramatic, and I, as an intellectual, cannot do anything,”<sup>96</sup> writes Mário Pedrosa, at the age of 81, for a newspaper in Rio de Janeiro. Pedrosa’s path as a public intellectual, political activist and art critic reflects this painstaking consciousness of the inherently revolutionary nature of genuine intellectual work, combined with its ostensible impotence vis-à-vis the political reality.

Born in 1900 in the countryside of Pernambuco, northeastern Brazil, Pedrosa attended boarding school in Lausanne, Switzerland and studied law in Rio de Janeiro between 1919 and 1923. As a student at the National University in Rio, he soon became involved with the group of Marxist intellectuals and militants. Pedrosa’s role as a left-wing activist in 1920s Brazil was so decisive that, according to the historian José Marques Neto, the origins of Trotskyism in the country have been repeatedly accounted for in the following terms:

Mário Pedrosa, militant of the Party since 1926, had been designated by the PCB in the end of 1927 to attend the Leninist School in Moscow. When in transit in Germany, he contracted an illness, postponed his trip to Moscow, and, while convalescent, got in touch with European oppositionists, particularly from France, as a result of which he adhered to Trotsky’s positions. From Europe, after giving up the Leninist School, he corresponded with Lívio Xavier and other comrades in Brazil, convincing them of the new political conceptions he had adopted and thus preparing the Brazilian oppositionist work.<sup>97</sup>

On the way to Russia, Pedrosa fell sick in Berlin precisely during the process of Trotsky’s expulsion from the Central Committee in Moscow. While recovering, he got acquainted with the left-wing opposition within the German Communist Party, and corresponded with his contacts in France, who advised him against pursuing the trip to

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<sup>96</sup> José Castilho Marques Neto, *Solidão Revolucionária. Mário Pedrosa e as Origens do Trotskismo no Brasil* [*Revolutionary Solitude. Mário Pedrosa and the Origins of Trotskyism in Brazil*] (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1993), p.190.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Russia. From Paris, the sociologist Pierre Naville, a member of the Surrealist group, wrote to Pedrosa in Berlin: “I think the present events in Russia suggest that you should not go there without previously informing yourself about the crisis from the outside.”<sup>98</sup> A few months later, Pedrosa reported about Naville’s concern in a letter to his friend and comrade Lívio Xavier in São Paulo, and pondered: “Today, I can say it was better to stay [in Berlin]. ... The situation is worse than it appears. And do you think I would have the freedom to get informed (without knowing Russian)? At the school? ... From here I can see things better, gather material and information.”<sup>99</sup>

Pedrosa remained in Berlin for two years; he studied philosophy, sociology and psychology at Berlin University, militated with the German Communist Party and spent time in Paris, where he met the group of Surrealist writers and artists, with some of whom he had been in contact already from Brazil. Besides Trotsky’s ideas, which were to play a crucial role in his political stance as a militant after returning to Brazil, the period in Berlin brought about two encounters that would deeply mark his career as an art critic: the theories of Gestalt psychology, and the etchings and woodcuts by Käthe Kollwitz.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 291.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.



Figure 122. Käthe Kollwitz, *The Widow*, 1922

Back in Rio de Janeiro in 1929, Pedrosa was negatively surprised by the general state of apathy among the capital's left-wing activists: "Here I found everything worse than it was before. Not only the city itself, but the people, and above all *our people* [that is, the communist militants]."<sup>100</sup> In the same letter to Lívio Xavier, he proposes the establishment of a small group within the Party, for theoretical studies, revision of perspectives, gathering information on the international and national situations. Then, after reaching a certain intellectual homogeneity – we get in touch with Trotsky – through the mediation of Naville (whom I have already contacted about the matter).<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Mário Pedrosa, Letter to Lívio Xavier, August 1929; quoted in Marques Neto, *Solidão Revolucionária. Mário Pedrosa e as Origens do Trotskismo no Brasil* [*Revolutionary Solitude. Mário Pedrosa and the Origins of Trotskyism in Brazil*], p. 223.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* p. 223.

Before the end of 1929, however, Pedrosa was expelled from the Brazilian Communist Party. The following year, after being arrested on Mayday for distributing pamphlets for the newly founded Grupo Comunista Lenine, he moved to São Paulo, where he worked as an editor for the newspaper *A Luta de Classes* (*Class Struggle*) and helped setting up the Brazilian section of the International Left-wing Opposition, of Trotskyist orientation.

His debut in art criticism took place within this atmosphere of intense political upheaval. The early 1930s were marked by economic and social turmoil as much in Brazil as in the international arena. The New York stock market crash of 1929 had deep consequences for the national economy, largely dependent on coffee exportation. The economic crisis triggered by the sudden drop in coffee price played an important role in destabilizing the alliance between São Paulo coffee growers and the cattle industry from Minas Gerais, which had ruled the country since 1894. Tensions over the succession increased after a controversial victory of the São Paulo candidate Julio Prestes in the March 1930 presidential elections, and, in November that year, the opposition forces led by Getúlio Vargas promoted a coup. The late 1920s had witnessed the rise of fascism internationally, and Hitler's rise to power in 1933 sharpened the antagonism between the large spectrum of the Brazilian left and the fascist-leaning Integralist movement. Pedrosa's inaugural conference for an exhibition of the German printmaker Käthe Kollwitz at the Modern Artists Club (Clube dos Artistas Modernos) in São Paulo, in 1933, transpires the urgency of its political moment.

## The Social Function of Art

The title of Pedrosa's conference, "Käthe Kollwitz's Red Way of Perceiving Life,"<sup>102</sup> could hardly be more straightforward about his political perspective on Kollwitz's black-and-white prints. As a militant intellectual, Pedrosa had never looked highly upon the notion of "art for art's sake." He befriended the group of modernist writers in São Paulo during the 1920s, but was always a fierce critic of their political nonchalance: "It is fashionable to despise politics, because, above all, they revere the sublime, pure, and beloved – Art," he remarked in a 1926 letter to Lívio Xavier. "They are intelligent guys, sometimes quite savvy, but – even against their own will – literati. Mário [de Andrade, the Modernist poet and critique] is the best of them, but he sometimes makes me feel sorry for his candidness, naivety, and his belief in art, science, in God, and in his work" (*Solidão* 197). Pedrosa seemed to share, from early on, the Surrealist writer Louis Aragon's view that "apolitical works are really militant works for the benefit of the bourgeoisie in power."<sup>103</sup> Both the content and tone of the conference on Kollwitz made clear that his activity as an art critic started as an extension of his political activism.

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<sup>102</sup> Mário Pedrosa, "Käthe Kollwitz e o Seu Modo Vermelho de Perceber a Vida [Käthe Kollwitz's Red Way of Perceive Life]" published as "As Tendências Sociais da Arte e Käthe Kollwitz [The Social Tendencies of Art and Käthe Kollwitz]" in *O Homem Livre* [*The Free Man*], n.6-9 (July 1933); reprinted in Mário Pedrosa, *Política das Artes: Textos Escolhidos I* [*The Politics of Art: Selected Texts I*]. Ed. Otília Arantes (São Paulo: EDUSP, 1995), pp.35-66.

<sup>103</sup> Louis Aragon quoted in Helena Lewis, "Surrealists, Stalinists, and Trotskyists: Theories of Art and Revolution in France between the Wars" in *Art Journal* vol. 52, n.1 (Spring 1993), p. 61.



Figure 123. Käthe Kollwitz, *Memorial to Karl Liebknecht*, 1919.  
 (“The living dead. Memory of January 15, 1919”)

Pedrosa’s approach to Kollwitz’s works displayed not only his firm commitment to politically engaged art, but also a clear distance from the thriving Stalinist aesthetics. As Otilia Arantes accurately observes: “For the first time in Brazil, someone attempted, in a systematic and reasonably articulated way, not only a Marxist interpretation of art, but an interpretation that was not aligned with the conclusions of the Kharkov Congress.”<sup>104</sup> In contrast to the indications of Soviet Cultural Commissar Andrei Zhdanov in the First Soviet Writers Congress in Kharkov, according to which art was “not intended to hold a mirror up to society, but to depict the image of a glowing future,”<sup>105</sup> the Kollwitz prints depicted the life of the German proletariat in the 1910s and 1920s in material and spiritual hardship, the suffering of ordinary

<sup>104</sup> Otilia Arantes, *Mário Pedrosa: Itinerário Crítico* [*Mário Pedrosa: Critical Itinerary*] (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2004), p. 34.

<sup>105</sup> Andrei A. Zhdanov, “Soviet Literature – The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature” in *Problems of Soviet Literature: Reports and Speeches at the First Soviet Writer’s Congress*. Ed. H.G. Scott (New York: International Publishers, 1935), pp. 250-52; quoted in Lewis, “Surrealists, Stalinists, and Trotskyists: Theories of Art and Revolution in France between the Wars,” p. 65.

people, and the disasters of war in the faces of orphans childless mothers. Although no mention of Zhdanov's "revolutionary romanticism" or "socialist realism" was made at the conference, Pedrosa's description of Kollwitz's "proletarian realism" confirms the Trotskyist critic's distance from official Soviet doctrines on art.

To the militant tone of Pedrosa's criticism in the early 1930s corresponded an understanding of the social function of art in terms of its immediate relation to society as a whole, and thus to the political context determined by class struggle. "Art does not enjoy special immunities against society's manias, nor do prejudices and petty or tragic contingencies of class egoism stop before its gates,"<sup>106</sup> he writes. "As any other social manifestation, art is internally corrupted by the historical determinism of the struggle between different social groups."<sup>107</sup> The theoretical framework of the 1933 conference made no room for a clearly demarcated, autonomous sphere of art in relation to the political realm. Pedrosa understood the separation between art and society merely as a negative trend deriving from the development of capitalist society, which should be abolished by genuinely revolutionary art. In fact, the absence of a positive notion of the autonomy of art in this early period is one of the main traits that differentiate it from Pedrosa's standpoint in the postwar.

Before approaching the actual works by the German printmaker, Pedrosa elaborates on the historical development of artistic practice and its relation to the modes of production that characterized different stages of civilization. The "aesthetic phenomenon is a social activity like any other,"<sup>108</sup> he argues; it is determined by the same factors that characterize society as a whole. Among such factors, it is "the manner applied collectively by a certain social group in a certain time and place to

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<sup>106</sup> Mário Pedrosa, "As Tendências Sociais da Arte e Käthe Kollwitz [The Social Tendencies of Art and Käthe Kollwitz]," p. 35.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

produce its food and subsistence” – in other words, its mode of production – which is the “only objective criterion that determines the character of a certain civilization.”<sup>109</sup> Referring to the German anthropologist Ernst Grosse’s investigations on the social origins of art, Pedrosa discusses the intrinsic connection between the artistic practices and subsistence activities of primitive hunter tribes and agriculture-based societies in different regions of the world.

Pedrosa observes that the arts of hunter peoples, regardless of climate and other particular circumstances, share certain significant characteristics, which differ clearly from those of the first agricultural societies. With the progress of civilization, he explains, man distances himself from nature, and the intermediary instrument between man and nature becomes increasingly complex, thus constituting what Marx termed “the productive organs of the social man.”<sup>110</sup> Technique becomes a system of its own. With the passage to a more complex and stable system of production, plastic talent decays, but a new element emerges in counterpart: ornamentation. In a later stage, the advent of the machine brings with it the need to produce a number of geometric forms that compose its different parts: the cylinder, the cone, the sphere – forms that are themselves designed and produced by machines. The aesthetic phenomenon is thus displaced from the realm of sensibility to that of abstract thinking.

By widening the division between man and nature, technical development progressively strips art of its social function. According to Pedrosa, modernism marks the apex of this process, in which aesthetics constitutes itself as an isolated realm and artists are entirely absorbed by a “second nature, superimposed to the primitive one, which is our modern, mechanical nature – technique.”<sup>111</sup> Historically severed from society through the development of its modes of production, modern art must be

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 46.



recuperated as a constitutive part of the social whole. And such recuperation of the social function of art is the artistic mission of the proletariat – “the only social group born with the machine, exploited by it,” but for the same reason, “the only capable of understanding its secret.”<sup>112</sup> The artistic field in the present day, Pedrosa claims, “is divided socially and aesthetically.” On one side are those artists who, dehumanized, divorced themselves from society and its vital problems and now observe them only impressionistically, for whom “society itself and man are a sort of still life.”<sup>113</sup> On the other side, the social artists: “those who approach the proletariat, and, in an intuitive anticipation of sensibility, perceive the future synthesis between nature and society.”<sup>114</sup> The latter is, most certainly, the case of Käthe Kollwitz.



Figure 124. Käthe Kollwitz, *The Mothers*, 1922/23

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

“The destiny of the art of Käthe Kollwitz is not in art itself,” Pedrosa writes, its end is ultimately political and lies in the proletariat. Hers is a partial and partisan art – but “how universal!” exclaims the critic; “Interested and tendentious as it is, there is no art that is more deeply human. The concept of humanity is, however, subordinated to a more preeminent reality, the concept of class.” Kollwitz is the painter of the “cosmic sensibility of the proletariat, and such sensibility ... simple, banal, but immense.”<sup>115</sup> Pedrosa discerns in Kollwitz’s prints the clear realization that “the social art of today is no longer a delicious pastime: it is a weapon.”<sup>116</sup> Her etchings and woodcuts are immediately inserted in a social context, and their aesthetics is a tool to give way to the intrinsic power of their social matter. Kollwitz’s works contribute to divide men and women even further into their class identities. This is the most important social function of her “proletarian realism,” as the necessary expression of the current stage of class struggle:

The dialectics of social dynamics, which the laws of logic and individual psychology cannot decipher, makes such works, so deeply inspired by love and human fraternity, serve, nonetheless, to feed the most implacable class hatred. And thereby is their generous social mission fulfilled.<sup>117</sup>

According to Pedrosa, the aesthetic dimension of Kollwitz’s work is essentially mediate. It is a function of her social commitment and class identification: “Her attitude towards the popular masses is more than an aesthetic attitude. It is a social imperative from which she cannot escape, a system of life. It is already a political attitude.”<sup>118</sup> By remaining attached to the aesthetic realm, Pedrosa claims, modernist painters became oblivious of the social matter. Kollwitz, on the other hand, is open to

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

the higher necessity of art's social function, and relates to aesthetics in a mediate way, guided by the inherent expressive needs of her social matter.

### **The Rise of Aesthetics**

A subtle but significant shift in Pedrosa's discourse on the social function of art can be discerned as early as 1934, in his essays on the Brazilian painter Candido Portinari. Pedrosa's encounter with Portinari's painting happened under rather unusual circumstances. In October 1934, antagonism between the Integralist front and left-wing activists reached a peak with a joint anti-fascist demonstration in downtown São Paulo. The police intervened heavily and many demonstrators were injured and killed. Pedrosa was shot in the leg and, chased by the police, found refuge in an art gallery where an exhibition of Portinari's works was taking place. He hid in the gallery for a number of days before moving to Rio de Janeiro. The clandestine stay allowed the critic enough time for a close engagement with Portinari's paintings, which inspired his first steps on a path that would eventually lead from the intrinsic expressive needs of the social matter to the formal experiments of the avant-garde.

At stake in this early engagement with Portinari was still the ultimate goal of recuperating the social function of art through its reintegration in society. But Portinari's works seem to point to a further stage in this process, no longer as the temporary art of the proletariat, but as the first sign of a possible realization of the ideal of a "great synthetic art." Arantes observes that, at that moment, Pedrosa "seems to abandon the project of a 'proletarian art.'" The connection between aesthetic dimension and the point of view of a class is no longer evident."<sup>119</sup> This intermediary stage in Pedrosa's critical trajectory is indicative of the deep transformation of his

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<sup>119</sup> Arantes, *Mário Pedrosa: Itinerário Crítico* [*Mário Pedrosa: Critical Itinerary*], p. 42.

discourse on the political role of art between the early 1930s and the postwar period. In his “Impressions on Portinari”<sup>120</sup> it is still a form of social realism that constitutes the object of Pedrosa’s criticism. But one can detect in his argument already the first traces of the notions that will guide his later perspective on geometric abstraction. Not just the social matter itself, but also – and mainly – the painter’s technical approach to it become decisive. According to Pedrosa, the development of Portinari’s canvas painting led him to a fundamental impasse in relation to the technical, social and material nature of his own art. He claimed that Portinari’s *Black Man with a Hoe* marks a point of no return, in which the artist seems to have exhausted the limits of oil painting, thus needing to “resort to the monumental techniques of sculpture and mural painting.”<sup>121</sup> Two years before Portinari’s actual experiments with mural painting, Pedrosa pointed out this necessary development in his work, and detected in it a sign of the coming synthetic art led by architecture, whose concrete possibility he would embrace, two decades later, in the political utopia of Brasília:

Portinari faces, perhaps, an impasse. But he might equally be facing the future. The return to the great synthetic art, presided by architecture, which was lost with the beginning of the capitalist era, announces itself. Portinari feels this attraction. Painting is on the way to this integration, through fresco, and modern mural painting; as it happened to Rivera, to the Mexican School. In fact, the social matter stares at him.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Mário Pedrosa, “Impressões de Portinari” *Acadêmicos e Modernos: Textos Escolhidos III* [*Academics and Moderns: Selected Texts III*]. Ed. Otília Arantes (São Paulo: EDUSP, 1998), pp. 155-161.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.



Figure 125. Candido Portinari, *Black Man with Hoe*, 1934. A note on the lower left margin of the drawing reads: “For Mário Pedrosa, with a hug, Candido Portinari, 1935.”

After two years of partly clandestine political activities in Rio, the Integralist turn of the Vargas Regime forced Pedrosa to leave the country carrying a fake passport in 1937. He stayed in Paris for one year and, in 1938, was sent to New York, where the Fourth International moved its headquarters, due to the imminent beginning of the war in Europe. In 1940, his position against the organization’s unconditional support for the Soviet Union found deep repercussions, causing Trotsky to exclude Pedrosa from the new secretariat of the Fourth International. During the war years, he worked for a number of international organizations in New York and Washington, failed in an attempt to return to Brazil in order to organize the left-wing opposition to

the Vargas government, and published sporadically on Portinari's panels at the Congress Library in Washington, among other subjects.



Figure 126. Candido Portinari, *Coffee* (Mural Painting), 1938

### **Abstract Politics**

In 1944, Pedrosa's writings on the works of Philadelphian painter and sculptor Alexander Calder, on the occasion of a large exhibition of his paintings and objects at the New York Museum of Modern Art, marked a decisive change in his perspective on the political potential of art. While never abandoning the notion of art's social function, Pedrosa rejected the realist perspective in painting. The notion of a great synthetic art as the reconnection of art and life, which appears in his writings for the first time in relation to Portinari and Mexican muralism, came to constitute one of the basic traits of his aesthetic thinking throughout the 1950s.

In Calder's creative trajectory, Pedrosa perceived a "door to the future," and a clear indication of the inherent social potential of abstract art. Under the impact of the MoMA exhibition, and of his own contact with the artist throughout the previous year, Pedrosa published his first articles on Calder in the Brazilian newspaper *Correio da Manhã*. Remarkably receptive to the objects of his criticism, to the degree that one can hardly distinguish between the critic's perspective and that of the artist and the works at stake, in 1944 it is almost as if Pedrosa identified Calder's development from representation into abstract composition as his own. At that point, it was no longer the urgency of the social matter that Pedrosa searched in the work of art; it was a different possibility of social relevance, which Portinari's work seemed to portend, that Pedrosa observed in its full potential in those paintings and objects apparently so indifferent to any kind of social context:

Calder's art does not reflect societies; neither does it sublimate subjective nightmares. It is rather a door to the future. It is already the attitude of someone, who, despising the present day, somber as it may seem to us, detects, from where it is, the distant horizons of the utopia, an utopia which eternally sketches itself before us. ... Calder communicates, at least with those of the future generations, who will possess, perhaps, enough energy for the necessary effort of integrating art and life.<sup>123</sup>

Through Calder's works, Pedrosa envisaged for the first time the political potential of abstract art, the same promise of integrating art and life, which he pursued in earlier times in Kollwitz's "proletarian realism," and Portinari's muralism. Sounding almost surprised by his own discovery, he claims vehemently: "It is not in vain that [Jean] Arp proclaimed, almost thirty years ago, for abstract art – Concrete

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<sup>123</sup> Mário Pedrosa, "A Máquina, Calder, Léger e Outros [The Machine, Calder, Léger, and Others]" in *Modernidade Cá e Lá: Textos Escolhidos 4 [Modernity Here and There: Selected Texts 4]*, p. 90.



Art, as he preferred to call it – the ambition of transforming the world.”<sup>124</sup> It is this ostensibly disinterested and unconcerned art that Pedrosa attempted to turn into a revolutionary weapon in the postwar period. He writes: “Disinterested as it is – so far from any propagandistic functions! – Calder’s art exercises, nonetheless, a silent catalytic action on the generalized, aggressive vulgarity of our time.”<sup>125</sup>



Figure 127. Alexander Calder, *Teodelapio*, Spoleto, Italy, 1962

From this new perspective, Pedrosa was able to devise an entirely different approach to modernism, clearly more sympathetic than his earlier take on the matter in the conference on Kollwitz. Even Paul Valéry’s stress on the useless character of art is

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<sup>124</sup> Mário Pedrosa, “Calder, Escultor de Cataventos [Calder, Sculptor of Windmills],” *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*



reinterpreted under a rather positive light: “The Valéryan notion of the uselessness of art does not mean for us that art is inadaptable to life, neither that it is opposed to it.”<sup>126</sup> Instead of dismissing modernism as mere technical experimentalism and bourgeois art, Pedrosa attempts here to appropriate its formal concerns and the quest for innovation into his political project.

Under such conditions, the autonomy of art is no longer incompatible with its social function. In the same series of articles on the theme of “the function of art,” published in 1947 in *Correio da Manhã*, the critic explains: “Ultimately, the French poet [Valéry] understood ‘uselessness’ as a synonym of ‘disinterestedness’. Art does not have an end outside of itself. A work of art is disinterested because it is not made to earn money, to prove a thesis, justify a political program or to defend a party.”<sup>127</sup> However, despite its independent, autonomous character, art is not isolated from social phenomena. Art exerts upon society a fundamental power: “Although keeping its old purity, the absolute and sacred independence of its own objectives, art persists, and exerts a slow but undeniable action of presence.”<sup>128</sup> What Pedrosa terms the “action of presence” of the work of art, cogently manifest in the fragile stability of Calder’s *Mobiles*, becomes one of the key concepts of his understanding of the political potential of art.

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<sup>126</sup> Mário Pedrosa, “A Força Educadora da Arte [The Educational Power of Art]” in *Forma e Percepção Estética: Textos Escolhidos II [Form and Aesthetic Perception: Selected Texts II]*. Ed. Otilia Arantes (São Paulo: EDUSP, 1995), p.61.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

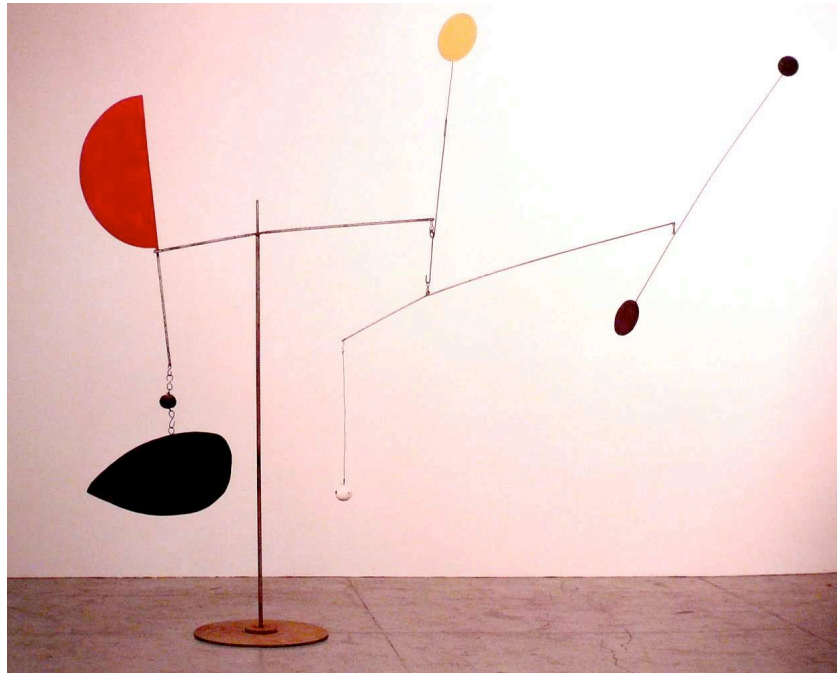


Figure 128. Alexander Calder, *Steel Fish*, 1934

### **Art and Revolution**

Pedrosa's new critical stance implied an implacable rejection of what he termed – in quotation marks – the “Marxist” interpretation of art. Responding to an attack on abstract painting by the writer Ibiapaba Martins, Pedrosa writes in 1952: “Still nowadays, many people talk about ‘the social tendencies in art’ in the old ‘Marxist’ sense, mainly of Russian inspiration.”<sup>129</sup> Yet, while referring to it with the precise expression of the title of his text on Käthe Kollwitz twenty years earlier (the social tendencies in art), his critique here aims most directly at the Stalinist notion of socialist realism, and hence does not necessarily contradict his own position in the early 1930s. Yet, he goes even further, and writes that “Marxism in art is reducible to

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<sup>129</sup> Mário Pedrosa, “Arte e Revolução [Art and Revolution]” in *Tribuna da Imprensa*. 29 March 1952; revised version in *Jornal do Brasil*. 16 April 1957; reprinted in *Política das Artes: Textos Escolhidos I [The Politics of Art: Selected Texts I]*, pp.95-98.

a tautology.”<sup>130</sup> Theorists of socialist realism assign to art the role of “reflecting” the reality of class struggle. The same theorists, he complements, also recommend that art should be aimed at the masses, and not at the elites. However, remarks Pedrosa, not without certain sarcasm:

The banal reality of the everyday is different: the masses are not interested in art. Actually, neither are the so-called elites. One thing is positive, anyway: the people like football, circus, theater (preferably vaudeville or review theater), carnival and cinema. What the people look for is entertainment, in all countries, ‘capitalist’ or ‘socialist’. The people are indifferent to figurative or abstract painting. And the elites as well. Which is quite natural. Bourgeois civilization, in its most fortunate expressions, is a civilization of the extroverted. Exteriorization is its most general characteristic. The accelerated rhythm of today’s life leaves no time for contemplation. And painting, like sculpture, demands contemplation in appreciation, silent meditation.<sup>131</sup>

In a certain sense, Pedrosa did not abandon the notion of realist painting. One could even claim that he was rather abandoned by it, that is, by the inherent inefficacy of painterly realism in an age of mass image consumption. As he writes in a short article published in *Jornal do Brasil*, in November 1957: “In our days, the documental in painting or sculpture is inevitably anachronistic.”<sup>132</sup> With the advent of photography and film, the documentary role of painting and sculpture was made innocuous. Under such circumstances, it was clearly no longer by depicting the conditions of the proletariat that painting could live up to its social function. In matters of social realism, it is impossible for painting to match the resources of photography and cinema: “De Sica in Italy is and will always be incomparably superior to any Guttuso, even multiplied by three, each time the issue is to portray proletarian life, and the misery of crumbling Italian capitalism today.”<sup>133</sup> From such an angle, his rejection

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

of realist painting and his shift to the political role of abstraction shines under a new light. Throughout the 1940s and 50s, Pedrosa saw in abstraction the only meaningful path for politically relevant painting. He writes in “Art and Revolution”:

Abstract painters and sculptors are, therefore, the most conscious of the historical time in which they live. They know that their arts cannot compete, in influence on popular taste, with more recent cultural expressions: cinema, radio, television. They know that their documentary role is finished.<sup>134</sup>



Figure 129. Renato Guttuso, *Occupation of Uncultivated Lands in Sicily*, 1949/50



Figure 130. Still from Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, 1948

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

Under such circumstances, an inevitable question arises: What is left as a positive political role for painting after the exhaustion of its documentary function? Still in “Art and Revolution,” Pedrosa rehearses an answer: “the mission [of painters and sculptors] is now another: to amplify the field of human language in pure perception, *in the limits of the individual*.”<sup>135</sup> In contrast to the media of mass communication that “panoramicallly enlarge contemporary vision, painting and sculpture particularize it, specify it,” and thereby possess the intrinsic potential of revolutionizing perception itself, in its inexorably individual level. Pedrosa concludes:

Political revolution is on its way; social revolution processes itself unavoidably. Nothing can contain them. But the revolution of sensibility, the revolution that will reach the core of the individual, its soul, will not come until men have new eyes, new senses to embrace the transformations that science and technology introduce day after day in our universe, and finally, intuition to overcome them. This is the great ‘final’ revolution, the deepest and most permanent, and it won’t be the politicians, even the most radical among them, nor the state bureaucrats who will realize it.<sup>136</sup>

Rather than direct intervention in actual politics, Pedrosa attributes to art the deeper and more far-reaching task of a revolution of sensibility. The revolution of the senses, which would enable men not only to embrace but also to overcome the technological determination of modern society, becomes the crucial social function of abstract art. The politics of abstraction is, in this sense, fundamentally a metapolitics. It intervenes in the realm that constitutes the basis of politics itself, and therefore assumes the character of a “final” and “permanent” revolution.

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., Italics in the original.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

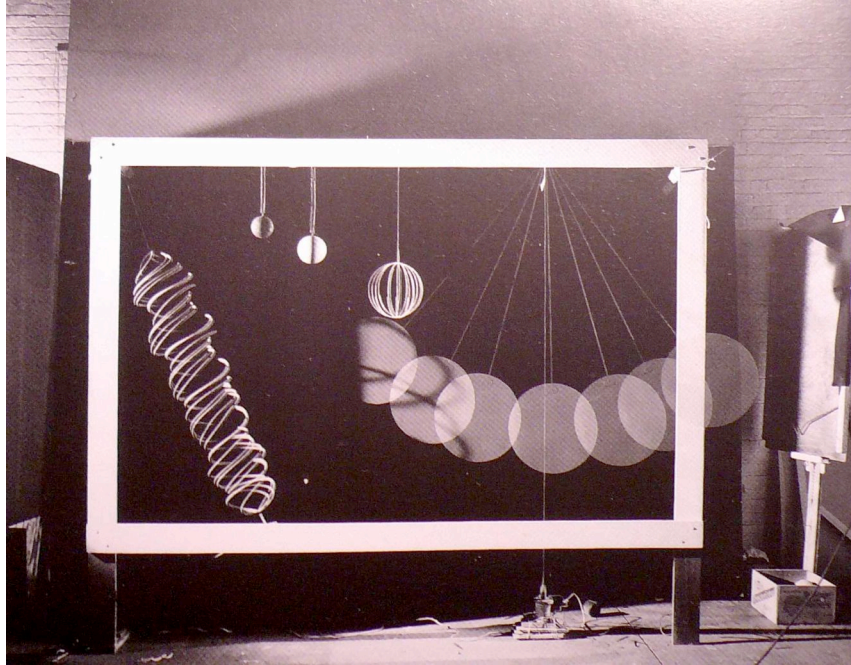


Figure 131. Alexander Calder, *White Frame*, 1934, in motion, photographed by Herbert Matter.

The project of a revolution of sensibility as the political function of art is not new. Its basic traits can be found at least as early as in Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*.<sup>137</sup> Similarly to Pedrosa's conception of art in the postwar, for Schiller, too, the political function of art coincides with its educational role. The very notion of the autonomy and purity of art goes hand-in-hand with its implicit political potential. As Jacques Rancière points out, by translating Kant's aesthetics into the political context of the French Revolution, Schiller inaugurates the conception of a revolution of sensibility, as a deeper revolution than the one in the sphere of state power. According to Rancière, even Marx's conception of a revolution in the realm of production is itself indebted to Schiller's displacement of the site of

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<sup>137</sup> Cf. Friederich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man. In a Series of Letters*. Trans. Reginald Snell (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1954).

revolutionary action from the realm of state power to the metapolitical level of human sensibility. Rancière writes:

For more than a century, Marxism represented the achieved form of metapolitics, referring the appearances of politics to the truth of productive forces and relationships of production, and promising, in place of political revolutions which merely change state formations, a revolution of the very mode of production of material life. But the revolution of producers is itself only thinkable on the basis of a revolution that had taken place within the very idea of revolution, in the idea of a revolution of the sensible existence in opposition to the revolution of state formations.<sup>138</sup>

Pedrosa's conceptualization of a revolution of sensibility anticipates the reemergence of a crucial problem of political aesthetics, which has played a significant role in contemporary debates on the political potential of art. Jacques Rancière's insightful interpretation of the problem of artistic autonomy from the perspective of the eighteenth-century "aesthetic revolution" enabled a reformulation of the problem of the political relevance of contemporary art. Without explicit recourse to eighteenth-century aesthetics, Pedrosa's argument follows a fundamentally Kantian framework, mediated by his intensive engagement with Gestalt psychology.

### **Form and Aesthetic Perception**

Since the mid 1940s, Pedrosa saw in the pure forms of geometric abstraction the power to transform human perception, and in the theories of Gestalt psychology a conceptual framework for his revolutionary aesthetics. The outlines of his aesthetic theories at the time are laid out in his 1949 thesis, "On the Affective Nature of Form in the Work of Art."<sup>139</sup> The question Pedrosa's thesis sets out to discuss is the

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<sup>138</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Malaise dans l'Esthétique* [*Aesthetics and its Discontents*], p. 49-50.

<sup>139</sup> Mário Pedrosa, "Da Natureza Afetiva da Forma na Obra de Arte [On the Affective Nature of Form in the Work of Art]" in *Forma e Percepção Estética: Textos Escolhidos II* [*Form and Aesthetic Perception: Selected Texts II*], pp. 105-230.

fundamental nature of the work of art and its power to affect human subjectivity. The art object, he writes,

is defined by a unique specificity: what it demands from us does not come from its capacity of satisfying any of our necessities or desires, like an umbrella in the middle of a rainstorm or a cold drink on a hot day. Objects are in those cases only a means to an end. Their qualities are transitory and intermediary. The action of a work of art upon us, on the other hand, its imposition, is only a function of its intrinsic qualities. There is no other object in the world of such kind.<sup>140</sup>

With the help of Gestalt psychology, he conducts the question of aesthetics to the problem of the nature of subjective apprehension of the unity of the object.

Pedrosa writes: “The problem of the apprehension of the object by the senses is the first problem of human knowledge. The first scientific acquisition, the first philosophical and aesthetic acquisitions are united in the beginning in our power of perceiving things through the senses.”<sup>141</sup> At this level, the aesthetic dimension of perception meets the problem of knowledge and cognition in general. In terms of the Kantian formulation of the question (which, as a matter of fact, constitutes one of the bases of Gestalt psychology itself), it can be said that, at this point, the aesthetic phenomenon as inherent to the question of art and beauty – that is, in the sense attributed to it in the first part of the *Critique of Judgment*<sup>142</sup> – converges with the problem of a “Transcendental Aesthetics” as the first stage of a science of perception (*Sinnlichkeit*) in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.<sup>143</sup>

Pedrosa introduces his argument by attacking Eugenio Rignano’s view that our basic perception of objective unity is dictated by affective reactions to objects that are

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>142</sup> Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

<sup>143</sup> Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 2000).



in some way “interesting or useful to us.”<sup>144</sup> Siding with Wolfgang Köhler against Rignano’s position, he argues that, in its most elementary level, perception is independent from such a utilitarian perspective. From this basic stage, he prepares the ground for a psychological conceptualization of the fundamentally disinterested character of perception, which will constitute the ground of his aesthetic theory. At stake here is the fundamental problem of figuration, that is, of the mental process of distinction and segregation of different elements. Pedrosa writes:

Such initial segregation is the most elementary and primary phenomenon of aesthetic experience. The process of perceptive segregation separates things in space, one context from the other, independently of their signification. ... On a sheet of white paper there are two clusters of stains. In one cluster there are three stains, in the other cluster, three more. The stains arrange themselves to our sight in these two groups, because a larger space divides them in three and three. Those of one group are never seen in the other. They are stains, things without any meaning. They don’t remind us of any object. Looking at the sheet of paper without a preconceived idea, the division in two groups is spontaneous. We can consciously try to form a different organization, and attempt, for instance, to see them in groups of two stains. It is logically possible, but, due to the primary, stronger disposition that pops up before our eyes, other combinations become harder and unstable, or psychologically unrealizable.<sup>145</sup>

Pedrosa displaces the problem of aesthetics to the level of involuntary perception of reality through the subjective mechanism of segregation and form-building. Although inherently subjective as a structure, perception is guided by external reality and resists the interference of our feelings. According to Pedrosa, it is, on the other hand, external reality and its forms – themselves independent of our feelings or will – that are “endowed with the power to affect us, to dictate our attitudes.”<sup>146</sup> The affective nature of reality, and, consequently, also of the work of art

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<sup>144</sup> Mário Pedrosa, “Da Natureza Afetiva da Forma na Obra de Arte [On the Affective Nature of Form in the Work of Art],” p. 110.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

– its power to intervene in our subjectivity – lies primarily in the element of form: “The whole secret of the acting power [of a picture], of the magic that it exerts on us, of its unique potential of awakening our emotions, resides in its structural form, in its *Gestalt*.”<sup>147</sup> Therefore, not only pictures whose meaning we can consciously or unconsciously grasp and connect to, but also – and perhaps in an even more radical manner – the basic figures of geometric abstraction possess the intrinsic power to affect our thought. Pedrosa writes: “Within the perceptive realm, *there are privileged forms*: they are regular, simple, symmetric.”<sup>148</sup>

The inherent power of pictures to affect our ways of thinking extrapolates the realm of the merely visible. Their power to intervene in our subjective states and attitudes goes beyond the field of visual perception, and into the realm of conceptual understanding. That happens because not only visual phenomena, but “all things,” according to Pedrosa, “come to our consciousness through form.”<sup>149</sup> Pictures can thus transform not merely our visual perception, but also our understanding of non-visual phenomena, since, also in such cases, it is through form that our understanding works. This broad character of the affective nature of form enables Pedrosa’s conception of an educational function of art.

### **Education through Form**

In December 1963, Pedrosa writes in the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* about a series of recent paintings by Fernando Diniz exhibited in a collective show in Rio de Janeiro:

His composition is always of cubist inspiration. A certain element of play predominates in his art, and this is also the reason why, among all of them, he

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

is the most conscious of plasticity, the most abstract: it is enough to look at his large canvas, just beside the Emygdian landscapes. The structure of abstract signs composes an admirable play of pulsating comings-and-goings, from the dense shades on one side to the free clarity on the other.<sup>150</sup>



Figure 132. Fernando Diniz, *Untitled*, 1953

Nothing in the tone of his analysis betrays the fact that none of the five participants of the exhibition were, in fact, professional artists. Fernando Diniz, Emygdio, and all others were patients of Centro Psiquiátrico do Engenho de Dentro, where, since 1946, psychiatrist Nise da Silveira had started an innovative experience with artistic education for the mentally ill, of which Pedrosa had become one of the major supporters from its early stages. Since his return to Rio de Janeiro after the end of World War II, more than just pointing out the possibility of a revolution of sensibility, Pedrosa took upon himself the task of theorizing and promoting such

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

revolution on the national level. And his revolutionary praxis took place not only within the walls of the museums and galleries of the official art circuit, but simultaneously as an educational project for non-artists. In 1947, by occasion of their first exhibition, Pedrosa got acquainted with the painters from Engenho de Dentro, whose works he would publicize and discuss in numerous occasions during the following decade. Nise da Silveira recalls:

Since the exhibition in the Ministry of Education, Mário Pedrosa frequented the painting workshop of the Occupational Therapy Section, fascinated by following the development of the paintings by Emygdio and the drawings by Raphael. He would often bring guests to the hospital, poets, writers. [The modernist poet] Murilo Mendes was one of the most assiduous. One day, in late May 1949, Pedrosa showed up accompanied by [the Belgian curator and art critic] Leon Degand, first director of the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art. Degand was so impressed by the artistic quality of many of the works created in the psychiatric hospital that he proposed to realize an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Shortly thereafter, Degand himself and Pedrosa began the selection of paintings, drawings and sculptures, from the point of view of their artistic value.<sup>151</sup>

Better than any programmatic claims, Pedrosa's approach to the works by the painters from the psychiatric hospital of Engenho de Dentro reveals the character of his commitment to the ideal of integration of art into life beyond established hierarchies of artistic value – and his way of mobilizing the art establishment to that end. In numerous articles about the artistic education of children as well as of the mentally ill, published in Brazilian newspapers throughout the 1950s, Pedrosa laid out concretely the practical terms the educational power of art towards a revolution of sensibility.

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<sup>151</sup> Nise da Silveira, “O Museu de Imagens do Inconsciente: Histórico [The Museum of Images of the Unconscious: A History]” in *Museu de Imagens do Inconsciente*. Ed. Mário Pedrosa (Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 1980).



Figure 133. Raphael, *Untitled*, 1948

The same notion of the “affective nature of form” that guided his investigations on Gestalt theory in 1949 grounds Pedrosa’s conception of artistic education.<sup>152</sup> He condemns the methods that “reduce the creative phenomenon to a simple technique for expressing emotions and conflicts, in order to enable catharsis in socially or psychologically maladjusted individuals.”<sup>153</sup> As a pedagogical approach, such limited understanding of artistic creativity risked paralyzing the child’s natural

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<sup>152</sup> Pedrosa’s commitment to the conceptual framework of Gestalt psychology to explain the educational power of art was particularly strong even for his time. But similar attempts to discuss art as an educational tool were being contemporaneously formulated by art critics in different parts of the world, and the usage of Gestalt theories for those purposes was by no means uncommon. One example can be seen in a book by the self-declared anarchist British critic Herbert Read, published 1943, *Education through Art*. While attempting to recuperate the notion of art as the basic principle of education from Plato and Schiller, Read bases his discussion also on field research in educational institutions in Britain, and on psychological theories of the time. On Read’s discussions of Gestalt theory in that context see: Herbert Read, *Education through Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), pp. 59-61.

<sup>153</sup> Mário Pedrosa, “Crianças e Arte Moderna [Children and Modern Art]” in *Forma e Percepção Estética: Textos Escolhidos II* [*Form and Aesthetic Perception: Selected Texts II*], p. 81.

development, he explains, and without missing an opportunity to mock informal abstraction: “The child would risk not developing spiritually, not leaving its shell, in an inverse, but isochronal or symmetric position to the *tachiste* of Paris (who wishes, by all means, to recover the egocentric spontaneity of childhood manifestations).”<sup>154</sup> And, therefore, he claimed, it was necessary to complete the educational effort of modern art – namely, through a pedagogy of form: “If education through art teaches children – and here is its great merit – not to fear emotions, but, on the contrary, to allow them to bloom and grow, it must also teach them to give those emotions form.”<sup>155</sup>

The goal of such pedagogical endeavor was not the formation of future professional artists, neither was Pedrosa’s view of artistic education confined to the limits of the visual. As he remarked in relation to Gestalt theory, “all things come to our consciousness through form.” The reach of a pedagogy of form extended thus well beyond an education of visual “taste.” The experience will serve those children wherever they will be tomorrow, he claimed. “The most authentic goal of this learning is to prepare the children to think rightly, to act with justice, to manipulate things judiciously, and to judge by the whole and not partially, ... They will see life as a healthy and beautiful work of art to be preserved, won’t applaud hysteric dictators, will march with progress without turning their back to freedom,”<sup>156</sup> he writes in 1954.

Pedrosa’s shuttling between political utopianism and a practical approach to the possibilities of art in everyday life and society is remarkable. A similar notion to that of an educational power of art grounded his discourse as the main theoretician of

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Mário Pedrosa, “Crescimento e Criação [Growing up and Creation]” in *Forma e Percepção Estética: Textos Escolhidos II* [*Form and Aesthetic Perception: Selected Texts II*], p. 72.

the Concretist avant-gardes of the 1950s in Rio de Janeiro. Writing in 1955 about the artists who took part at the second exhibition of Grupo Frente in the early stages of the Concretist movement, he comments: “They are men and women of faith, convinced of the revolutionary, regenerative mission of art. One thing unites them, which they don’t give up, and are ready to defend it against all and everybody, putting it above all and everything – freedom of creation.”<sup>157</sup> But this freedom could not mean, in any case, “the ridiculous Parnassian principle of so-called ‘art for art’s sake’. According to Pedrosa, their art aimed, on the contrary, at “the highest social mission, namely of providing style to the times and transforming men, educating them to exercise the senses with plenitude and to model their own emotions.”<sup>158</sup> Just as for the painters of Engenho de Dentro, art fulfilled for those “professional artists” an educational and revolutionary mission.

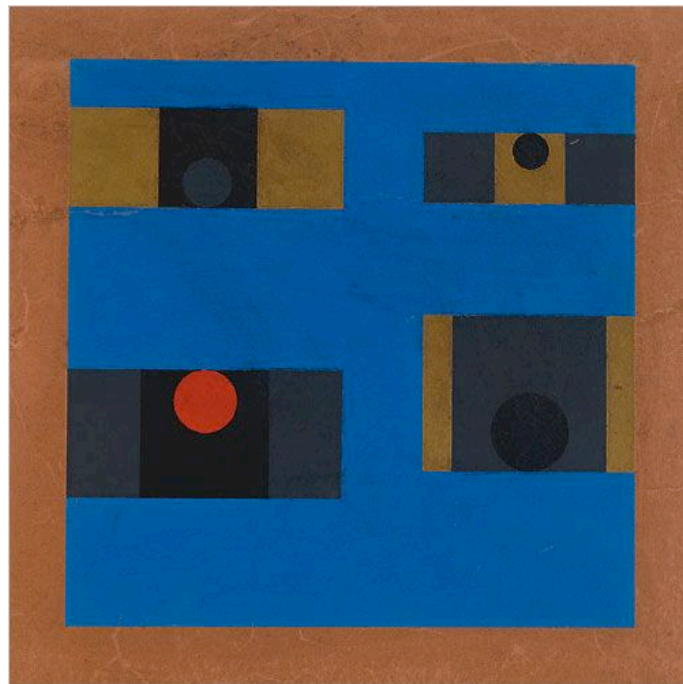


Figure 134. Hélio Oiticica, *Untitled*, 1955

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<sup>157</sup> Mário Pedrosa, “Grupo Frente” in *Acadêmicos e Modernos: Textos Escolhidos III* [*Academics and Moderns: Selected Texts III*], p. 248.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*



At the height of 1950s developmentalism in Brazil, Pedrosa's vision of the educational and revolutionary function of art acquired the aspect of a national political project. In a 1981 interview, he comments on the political circumstances of his embrace of Concretism in the 1950s: "Concretism was a movement that required a certain discipline, and Brazil needed discipline, a certain character and order as a way to educate the people."<sup>159</sup> During that time, Pedrosa's vision of a great synthetic art coordinated by architecture seemed to realize itself in the construction of Brasília, as he played a major role in the debates on the architecture of the future capital. On the occasion of the 1959 International Congress of Art Critics in Brazil, he was the one to propose its rather polemic title: "Brasília, Synthesis of The Arts."<sup>160</sup> The "Brazilian constructive project in the arts" and Pedrosa's critical participation in it, cannot be understood apart from those political circumstances under which art seemed to fulfill its destiny as concrete social reality.

## Coda

Powerful in their immediate ways of affecting and transforming our sensibility, images are, nevertheless, inexorably dependent upon an implicit relationship to verbal discourse. As Naoki Sakai observes, the visual discourses of painting and sculpture "do not constitute 'firsthand' signification." Only insofar "as we are able to talk about them, they can be read and therefore grasped as significative."<sup>161</sup> Before conceptual artists of the 1960s attempted to "annex the function of the critic," and thus "make the

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<sup>159</sup> Mário Pedrosa, Interview. Cocchiarale and Geiger, *Abstracionismo geométrico e informal: A vanguarda brasileira nos anos 50*, p. 106.

<sup>160</sup> Cf. Arantes, *Mário Pedrosa: Itinerário Crítico [Mário Pedrosa: Critical Itinerary]*, p. 109.

<sup>161</sup> Sakai, *Voices of the Past. The Status of Language in Eighteenth-Century Japanese Discourse*, p. 3.



middle-man unnecessary”<sup>162</sup> (Joseph Kosuth), it was mainly the role of art criticism to verbalize the signification of the visual discourses of the plastic arts. In doing so, critics played the role of mediators between the apparent universality of the visual and the diverse local dialects of cultural politics.

Politically concerned art critics in the 1950s found in the ostensible autonomy of abstraction a powerful mode of political intervention through art. Pedrosa’s conceptualization of the transformative power of form paradigmatically unveils the implicit heteronomy of abstraction, thus establishing the grounds of its political and social function. According to Pedrosa, the subject as spectator is visually stimulated by the work of art, whose form affects a transformative process in the very mechanism of human sensibility. Under such conditions, the subject’s relationship to the work of art is strictly contemplative. The spectator is conceived of as entirely passive, and relates to the work with fundamental disinterestedness. It is under this condition of disinterested contemplation that the spectator is most efficaciously affected by the work. Due to its irreducible autonomy, the work of art possesses a distinctive power to affect and transform our feelings and attitudes. The “affective nature” of the work of art, ground for its revolutionary political potential, is thus entirely dependent on its form.

A radical critique of that position would have to wait for the works and theories of the younger generation of artists who emerged in the early 1960s. By challenging contemplation and ultimately renouncing autonomy, artists like Akasegawa Genpei, Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica brought to a crisis the very notion of art. Perhaps what Pedrosa’s analysis of the affective nature of form failed to take into account was the fact – so manifest in his own pedagogical experiences – that, for

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<sup>162</sup> Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).

the painters of Engenho de Dentro as for the members of Grupo Frente, the real education through art and the actual revolution of sensibility was taking place through artistic praxis, rather than through aesthetic contemplation.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE MATTER OF PAINTING

Hikosaka Naoyoshi writes in 1973 that “Japanese postwar art, which began with Gutai’s claim that ‘when matter is revealed as matter it starts to speak for itself’, comes back to its starting point in the end of the 1960s with Mono-ha, thus outlining the trajectory of a circle.”<sup>163</sup> By establishing a link between Yoshihara Jirō’s 1956 “Gutai Art Manifesto”<sup>164</sup> and Lee Ufan’s theorization of Mono-ha in the late 1960s, he points out the problem of materiality as the origin and destiny of the circular trajectory of postwar art in Japan. With this epoch-making formulation, not only does Hikosaka put forth, for the first time, the fateful *topos* of the “closed circle” as a metaphor of the historical trajectory of Japanese postwar avant-garde, but he also implicitly locates in Yoshihara’s “Gutai Art Manifesto” the initial locus of the questioning of materiality in Japanese postwar art discourse.

However, the problem of materiality did not emerge for the first time in the context of Japanese postwar art with Yoshihara’s Manifesto; its traces can be found in the Japanese art media at least as early as 1953. By the time of the time of publication of the Gutai Manifesto, the debates concerning the role of matter in painting were reaching a peak. Art critic Hirai Shōichi speculates that the Manifesto should be regarded rather as Yoshihara’s response to the heated debate on materiality among art

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<sup>163</sup> Hikosaka Naoyoshi, “Tojirareta enkan no kanata wa. ‘Gutai’ no kiseki kara nani wo... [Beyond the Closed Circle. What after the Trace of Gutai?],” p. 91.

<sup>164</sup> Cf. Yoshihara Jirō, “Gutai bijutsu sengen [Gutai Art Manifesto].”

critics, stirred by the introduction of *Informel* in Japan in the mid-1950s.<sup>165</sup> In fact, the origins of the 1950s debates on materiality can be spotted even further back, in the early postwar disputes between realism and avant-garde. Precisely for implicitly responding to a major political and aesthetical impasse, the 1950s debates on materiality resonate throughout the subsequent narratives of postwar art in Japan.

For leftist art critics who opposed the flattening of aesthetic thought by the Stalinist conception of socialist realism, the materialist appeal of *Informel* provided the possibility of reinventing a Marxist aesthetics attuned with the newest trends of contemporary painting. To some extent, it would not be too far-fetched to read the long-standing debates on materiality that took place within 1950s Japanese art criticism as a recurrent attempt to come to terms with the problem formulated in the first of Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach" concerning the possibility of a genuinely revolutionary relationship with material reality. Marx writes in 1844:

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included, is that the thing (*Gegenstand*), reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object (*Objekt*) or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively. ... Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, differentiated from thought-objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective (*gegenständliche*) activity. ... Hence he does not grasp the significance of "revolutionary," of "practical-critical," activity.<sup>166</sup>

If a performative critique of contemplation through radical experimentation with the status of the object of art (and of the object in general) constituted the basis of a large share of the works of the 1960s generation, its theoretical grounds were prepared through the debates on the materiality of painting throughout the 1950s. In this sense, the political problem underlying the question of materiality in postwar

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<sup>165</sup> Hirai Shōichi, Personal interview. 5 June 2007.

<sup>166</sup> Karl Marx, "Thesen über Feuerbach [Theses on Feuerbach]" in *Die Frühschriften [Early Writings]*. (Stuttgart: Kröner, 2004), p. 402.

Japanese artistic discourse, whose legacies materialize within the early 1960s works of Neo-Dada artists such as Akasegawa Genpei and Shinohara Ushio, could be thus articulated: how to turn art – in its intrinsic relationship with materiality – into a revolutionary, that is, “practical-critical” activity?



Figure 135. Ushio Shinohara, *Cheerful Fourth Dimension*, 1963 (Photo by Hirata Minoru)

This chapter explores the discourse on the materiality of painting in Japanese art criticism in the 1950s and contextualizes the so-called “*Informel* typhoon” within the larger continuum of art-theoretical debates in postwar Japan. I point out the continuity between the 1950s debates on materiality and the early-postwar struggles between social realism and avant-garde aesthetics, and analyze two historically and theoretically crucial instances of the questioning of the role of matter in painting in the

1950s, namely Segi Shinichi's 1953 essay "The Problem of Man in Painting"<sup>167</sup> and Haryū Ichirō's interpretation of *Informel* circa 1956.

### **Haryū Ichirō and the politics of matter**

When Miyakawa Atsushi attempted to write, in 1963, a brief chronicle of the rapid transformations of Japanese art discourse in the previous decade, it was mostly in Haryū's numerous pieces published in different art journals that he discerned a basic conceptual framework to tackle the problem. As Miyakawa remarks, "[Haryū] was the only critic who, recognizing and subjectively grasping its necessity, confronted the 'landslide' of Japanese art caused by *Informel* with a consistent methodology."<sup>168</sup> Haryū's interpretations of *Informel* were crucial for the development of a critical discourse on materiality, which constituted one of the main conceptual basis for the transformations of art in Japan in the early 1960s. Haryū's role in those debates and the importance of his interpretation of *Informel* in terms of its revolutionary usage of painterly *matière* consisted in pointing out the possibility of a synthesis of the antagonistic positions of realism and avant-garde in postwar artistic discourse in Japan.

From Mário Pedrosa's six-month sojourn in Japan, Haryū recalled attending a public lecture at the National Museum of Modern Art, and being puzzled by the Brazilian critic's harsh comments on the Japanese avant-garde's dismissal of its own artistic traditions:

It was around 1958 or 59; Pedrosa claimed that rejecting tradition too swiftly the Japanese avant-garde became something like a floating weed. And I was

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<sup>167</sup> Segi Shinichi, "Kaiga ni okeru ningen no mondai [The Problem of Man in Painting]" *Bijutsu hihyō* (December 1953), pp. 37-45.

<sup>168</sup> Miyakawa Atsushi, "Henbō no suii: Montaju-fu ni [A History of Change: In Montagelike Compilation]."

surprised, because it was not our intention to deny tradition. Simply, by rejecting its hardened, ruined aspects, we strived to make visible the essence of tradition. That's how we thought.<sup>169</sup>



Figure 136. Art critic Haryū Ichirō at his office in Kawasaki, October 2006

Haryū's continuous engagement with the Japanese postwar avant-gardes was never the fruit of formal adventurism or gratuitous taste for novelty. His criticism insistently attempted to trace the thin thread of politically relevant art between what Gullar described as the “potentially alienating character of avant-gardism” and the “potentially regressive character of realism.” In Ōura Nobuyuki's 2001 documentary

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<sup>169</sup> Haryū also observed that this accusation of rejecting tradition too radically and thus assuming the character of a fruitless adventurism was recurrent among foreign critics in relation to the Japanese avant-gardes of the 1960s in comparison to their Western counterparts. Haryū Ichirō, Personal interview. 26 Oct. 2006. In February 1959, Mário Pedrosa gave a conference at the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo, entitled “Tradition et Critique à l'Est et à l'Ouest [Tradition and Critique in the East and West]” translated into Japanese as “Dentō to hihyō no tō-zai.” Published in Portuguese as “Tradição e Crítica no Japão e no Ocidente” in *Jornal do Brasil* (21 February 1959); reprinted in *Modernidade Cá e Lá: Textos Escolhidos IV [Modernity Here and There. Selected Texts IV]*, pp. 219-25.

*Nihon shinjū. Haryū Ichirō, The Man Who Embraced Japan as a Whole*, Haryū is seen in a countryside bar in South Korea, vehemently arguing that what he has always understood by avant-garde “is something that takes place *within* the perspective of contemporary realism. What is called modernism, on the other hand, can be described as an avant-garde devoid of any realist perspective. A simple search for the new.”<sup>170</sup> Haryū’s activities as a critic and co-conspirator of the 1950s and 1960s Japanese avant-gardes corroborate this view of the political potential of avant-garde art in its fundamental continuity with a realist project.

Notwithstanding the affinities between their political positions and their shared commitment to a revolutionary aesthetics beyond socialist realism, Haryū and Pedrosa pursued, nonetheless, diametrically opposed paths in their concrete artistic choices. In contrast to Pedrosa’s embrace of the constructivist discipline of Concrete Art and utter rejection of the subjectivism of informal abstraction, Haryū discerned in the practice of *Informel* painting the revolutionary path of a renewal of man’s relationship with the material world. Rather than subjectivism, he perceived in *Informel*’s appeal to the materiality of painting the possibility of an entirely new elaboration of the subject-object relationship itself. In relation to Pedrosa’s conceptualization of a politics of form, it can be said that such an embrace of the materiality of painting takes an important step towards a critique of contemplation.

According to Haryū’s own account of his intellectual trajectory, the concern with the political potential of matter was at the origin of his initial engagement with the visual arts. About the connection between his political commitments and the beginning of his activity as an art critic, Haryū remarked in a 2006 interview:

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<sup>170</sup> Ōura Nobuyuki, dir. *Nihon shinjū. Haryū Ichirō: Nihon o marugoto dakikondeshimatta otoko* [*Nihon Shinju. Haryū Ichirō: The Man Who Embraced Japan as a Whole*]. DVD (Tokyo: Kunitachi Studio, 2001), count 22:30.



As a Marxist, I couldn't get an academic job... I published literary criticism in left-wing journals as a 'free writer'. But left-wing publications pay you close to nothing. So, I started to write for art journals – which still didn't pay much, but enough to make a living. ... At the same time, I thought that words always contain a certain element of deception. In works of art, on the other hand, we have to do with actual things, with matter (*busshitsu*). So I came to think that art was a more direct way to transform the Japanese people through its senses (*kankaku*), through sensibility (*kansei*).<sup>171</sup>

Apart from the rather problematic distinction between the materiality of things and a pretended immateriality of words, it is worth noticing the tacit association here between the materiality of art and its relation to human sensibility. Haryū locates in the material constitution of the visual artwork, rather than in its form, the source of its transformative potential. It was also a concern with the materiality of art and its potential of transforming human sensibility that served as the basis for Haryū's interpretation of *Informel* painting in 1956, on the occasion of the groundbreaking exhibition "Art of Today's World." In the 1957 essay "Matter and Man," he discerned within the thick patches of paint of Jean Fautrier's and Jean Dubuffet's canvases the expression of a renewed relationship between man and materiality.<sup>172</sup> Those paintings "discovered unknown modes of signification from the midst of the formless chaos of a direct clash between act and matter," he writes in 1979, commenting on the episode in *The Rise and Fall of Postwar Art*.<sup>173</sup> Nonetheless, Haryū recognized as well that, beyond the paintings themselves, "in order to understand why [*Informel*] was then received not merely as a new style of abstract art, but as a turning point in the topology of expression (*hyōgen no isō*), a thorough examination of modern Japanese art would be necessary."<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Haryū, Personal interview.

<sup>172</sup> Haryū Ichirō, "Busshitsu to ningen [Matter and Man]" in *Mizue* (January 1957), pp. 43-47.

<sup>173</sup> Haryū, *Sengo bijutsu seisuishu* [*The Rise and Fall of Postwar Art*], p. 102.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

It is not my intention to supply here such a general examination of the context of modern art in Japan as would be necessary to fully account for the manifold background against which the reception of *Informel* took place in 1956. Yet, as far as the origins of the discourse on materiality that characterized Haryū's own interpretation of *Informel* and large part of its reception in the 1950s Tokyo art world are concerned, important references can be traced within the questions formulated in the so-called "realism debates" (*riarizumu ronsō*) of the early postwar years, and repeated under different guises throughout the early 1950s in the realm of literary and art criticism. Haryū's interpretation of *Informel* from the perspective of its relation to materiality perceives in its innovations in painterly expression the possibility of a synthesis of the antagonistic positions of realism and avant-garde in postwar artistic discourse in Japan.

### **Avant-Garde and Realism**

Insofar as it refers back to Engels' paradigmatic formulation about "depicting typical characters in typical circumstances,"<sup>175</sup> the conception of social realism in the visual arts is recurrently confronted by its status as a translation of an originally literary concept, whose adaptation to the realm of painting and sculpture is repeatedly put into question. Within the Japanese postwar context, the painterly "realism debates" (*riarizumu ronsō*) were never entirely divorced and independent from the historical literary debates on realism, which started as early as January 1946 with a dialogue between Honda Shūgo and other members of the journal *Kindai bungaku* and the literary theorist and member of the Japan Communist Party Central Committee

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<sup>175</sup> Engels writes in 1888: "Realism, to my mind, implies, besides truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances." Friedrich Engels, "Letter to Margaret Harkness. London, April 1888" in *Selected Correspondence*, <http://www.marxists.org>.

Kurahara Korehito. As Victor Koschmann points out, the significance of those discussions extended well beyond the literary realm and constituted an important front of the philosophical debates on subjectivity and democratic revolution in early postwar Japan.<sup>176</sup> In the visual arts, Nakamura Giichi locates the beginning of the “realism debates” in an essay by the art critic and JCP member Hayashi Fumio on an exhibition of Meiji Period oil paintings by Takahashi Yūichi.<sup>177</sup> The debate, which started between Hayashi and Hijikata Teiichi, on the different conceptions of realism in Meiji oil painting, slowly developed into an opposition between realism and avant-garde in postwar artistic practices.



Figure 137. Takahashi Yuichi, *Tofu*, 1876-77

While the literary and philosophical debates on subjectivity slowly faded away with the Occupation’s “turn away from the priorities associated with

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<sup>176</sup> Cf. Victor Koschmann, *Revolution and Subjectivity in Postwar Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 41-87.

<sup>177</sup> Nakamura, Giichi. *Nihon kindai bijutsu ronsōshi [History of the Debates of Modern Japanese Art]* (Tokyo: Kyuryudo-sha, 1981), pp. 265-6.

democratization,”<sup>178</sup> toward a cold war-oriented politics in the early 1950s, in the realm of painting, the discussions on realism and avant-garde continued throughout the following decade. In a 1953 roundtable discussion published in the journal *Bijutsu hihyō* under the title “Avant-Garde and Realism,” the argument between artist Okamoto Tarō and literary critic Hanada Kiyoteru unfolds in the following fashion:

Okamoto: (...) It is necessary to trace a clear technical distinction between realism in literature and realism in painting. Up to now, the method of literary realism has been simply carried over and superficially applied, as it is, in the realm of painting. At least, it seems to me that many left-wing artists incur in such confusion. Because literature is something that originally takes place in the realm of ideas, it wouldn't make sense to simply take its theory of realism, the notion of typical characters in typical circumstances, as is, into the realm of painting. A certain knowledge, and a particular mode of thinking and apprehending *things (mono)* in a more strict sense are necessary. Artists, and particularly painters, stand in the position of making *things*. While this is the most important question, people end up paying more attention to the level of ideas (...).

Hanada: That's because the methodological problem cannot be separated from the question of knowledge and logic. In the case of literature and painting, at the same time as one differentiates between them, it is necessary to find a standpoint from where one can see their unity. (...) Because it is not clear, in terms of method, what the relationship between avant-garde art and socialist realism is, some people come up with a notion like critical realism, trying to think something like a common front. But that's a problem.<sup>179</sup>

In Okamoto's claim about the difference between realism in literature and painting, it is noticeable how the material aspect of the latter, that is, its relationship to “things,” emerges as the main distinguishing factor. Nonetheless, it was the attempt to combine and harmonize realism and avant-garde practices mentioned by Hanada that predominated among artists and critics of the younger generation who started their

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<sup>178</sup> Koschmann, *Revolution and Subjectivity in Postwar Japan*, p. 4.

<sup>179</sup> Hanada Kiyoteru, Suematsu Masaki and Okamoto Tarō, “Zadankai: Avangyarudo to riarizumu [Roundtable Discussion: Avant-Garde and Realism]” in *Bijutsu hihyō* (December 1953), p. 26-7.

professional activities in the postwar. In the early 1950s, among those whose position could be described as an attempt to synthesize avant-garde techniques and the political commitment of social realism was a group of painters who developed a method of political documentary painting employing Surrealist techniques, which came to be known as Reportage Painting (*Ruportaju kaiga*). Their attempts were faced with strong criticism from the more conservative art theorists in the Communist Party, such as Hayashi Fumio himself. Ikeda Tatsuo, one of the members of the group, recalls the thorny relationship between politically concerned avant-garde painters and JCP aestheticians in the early 1950s:

In Japan's so-called "avant-garde Party," that is, within the Communist Party itself, or in the Socialist Party, those people were seriously thinking about revolution, but their views on art were extremely old-fashioned. Of course, this is connected to the fact that Stalin himself, when he took over the lead of the Russian revolution, denied the Russian avant-garde. When Stalin comes to power, after Lenin, one sees the emergence of the idea of socialist realism. ... At that point, even the avant-garde changed. People like Malevitch switched from abstraction to some sort of impressionist representational painting. ... In postwar Japan, the Communist Party pressed the arts to commit to the doctrine of socialist realism. So, as I was saying before, paintings like mine were rejected by the Party, for not conforming to the principles of socialist realism. They would say it had Surrealist components. Critics who belonged to the Communist Party, such as Hayashi Fumio would use the term "bourgeois art." In the European context, for instance, they would say that after Cézanne everything is bourgeois art. Abstraction too, and Surrealism: from the end of the nineteenth century, for them it was all bourgeois art. Such radical views were held by people in the Communist Party. All they wanted was socialist realism. But what is socialist realism, after all? I don't know. The term *tenkei* (type, pattern)<sup>180</sup> was frequently used in that context. That was their buzzword. For example, it was considered bad to depict the dark and miserable aspects of workers lives. One had to paint the workers as always healthy and happily busy, looking forward to the construction of socialism, or preparing the revolution. That's what was considered good, such a simple-minded way of thinking. Party members would come over to painters, trying to force such

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<sup>180</sup> "*Tenkei*" is the term used in the Japanese translation of Engels formulation of literary realism in terms of the "typical (*tenkeiteki*) characters in typical circumstances."

ideas upon our works. Basically, a way of simply making use of (*riyō suru*) art for political purposes.<sup>181</sup>



Figure 138. Ikeda Tatsuo, *Sea of Rage (Ikari no umi)*, 1953

Another attempt to reconcile both positions, or rather to show the inherent necessity of technical experimentation for painterly realism itself, can be observed in Segi Shinichi's debut essay as an art critic, entitled "The Problem of Man in Painting."<sup>182</sup> In *The Rise and Fall of Postwar Art*, Haryū comments on the extent to which the problems discussed by Segi overlapped with his own interests concerning the question of materiality; indeed, one can find in Segi's approach to the question of materiality in relation to the "problem of man in painting" some of the basic traits of Haryū's interpretation of *Informel* a few years later. In fact, a precursor of Segi's approach to the problem of materiality in painting can be found in Takiguchi Shūzō's

<sup>181</sup> Ikeda Tatsuo, Personal interview. 22 Nov. 2006.

<sup>182</sup> Segi Shinichi, "Kaiga ni okeru ningen no mondai [The Problem of Man in Painting]" in *Bijutsu hihyō* (December 1953), pp. 37-45.

influential 1938 essay “Modern Art.”<sup>183</sup> It is thus not exaggerated to claim that the conditions for *Informel*’s reception in Japanese art criticism had been prepared long before its momentous arrival in 1956.

### **Man and Matter**

Segi’s argument in the 1953 essay “The Problem of Man in Painting” starts with a discussion of the importance of materiality in our current understanding of man as a defining characteristic of contemporary society: “The peculiarity of contemporary society lies in the fact that, as far as the relationship between man and matter is concerned, the latter has come to occupy a remarkably dominant position.”<sup>184</sup> The fact that, from the outset, Segi’s essay defines the question in terms of a broader social and cultural issue of “contemporary society” rather than as an art-historical problem should not be overlooked. It is, first of all, a question of the new role of matter in culture and society in general that is at stake, in other words, the materialism of contemporary society. Only in that sense, that is, as a question that regards society as a whole, does the problem of matter become a concern for painting.

It is generally in a positive light, as the condition of possibility of a new cultural formation, that Segi describes the heightened status of matter in contemporary society and culture. Contrary to the negative reaction to the rise of materiality by those European cultural critics around the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, “who thought of that as a crisis or decline of civilization,”<sup>185</sup> Segi does not regard the new status of matter as a threat to the humanity of man understood as spirituality or subjective free will; he stresses that “It is not adequate to think of this

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<sup>183</sup> Takiguchi, Shūzō. “Kindai geijutsu [Modern Art]” *Korekushon Takiguchi Shūzō* [*Collection Takiguchi Shūzō*] (Tokyo: Misuzu shobō, 1991), pp. 385-414.

<sup>184</sup> Segi, “Kaiga ni okeru ningen no mondai [The Problem of Man in Painting],” p. 37.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

phenomenon as an intervention of matter in the domain of man or an oppression of humanity.”<sup>186</sup> According to Segi, this sort of spiritual pessimism was precisely an expression of the fear of those European intellectuals in face of the growing mechanization and standardization brought about by “the increasing power of matter.”<sup>187</sup> The same mechanization and the same “increasing power of matter,” one might add, which generated Marx’s historical materialism a few decades earlier. But, in contrast to their pessimistic predictions, “man did not die,” society was not simply aging. It is remarkable, he adds, that even the “desperate Valéry, who, among all, displayed the most susceptible reaction” to that crisis, was still able to make an effort to “connect his vague hope concerning the future to America as the equinox of the Atlantic.” The expansion of matter, Segi claims, must be therefore “at the same time the progress of man.”<sup>188</sup>

The realm of painting must also be deeply determined by this heightened position of materiality. What defines the contemporaneity of painting, claims Segi, “is the fact that the *objet* came to be thought as something more than a mere theme or motif.”<sup>189</sup> Although the reference to *objet* implicitly draws upon the tradition of Surrealism and its reception in Japan, Segi points out the origins of such tendencies in an earlier period. If we look for the beginning of such consciousness of the role of matter in the history of painting, he argues, “we must recognize its pioneer in Cézanne,” the painter “who was so extremely fearful of society and nature,” precisely because he felt more than anyone else “the magnitude of their material power.”<sup>190</sup> Vis-à-vis the Impressionists, he finds that, in Cézanne, “the harmony that derived from the

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.



magnanimous impression received from nature is lost, and, hence, the stronger the nature is, the greater his pain.”<sup>191</sup> The “material power of nature” is felt here in all its irreducible intensity “as the very limit of human consciousness.” How to deal with this fundamental realization of Cézanne becomes the problem for all subsequent painters after him.<sup>192</sup>



Figure 139. Paul Cézanne, *The Bathers Resting*, 1875-76

Form and fantasy, the elements that define each of the two major trends in modern painting, emerge, according to Segi, as attempts to deal with the increasingly determinant role of matter. When the “impressionist abundance of color was no longer

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> At this point, as Haryū remarked, one can see how closely Segi follows Takiguchi’s take on Cézanne, as well as his understanding of materiality and the history of modern painting. Takiguchi writes: “[Cézanne]’s spiritual tendencies are all too famous. But the confrontation of spirit (*seishin*) and matter (*bussuitsu*) that emerges here is the fateful contradiction that can be seen in modern thought since the second half of the nineteenth century.” Takiguchi, “Kindai geijutsu [Modern Art],” p. 385.

enough to fill the contradictions between the lucidity of nature and the pain of sensation,” writes Segi, *form* comes in as the decisive plastic method to define the new locus of man in contemporary painting. Cézanne was the one who most cogently experienced the discovery of material reality, upon which the whole history of contemporary painting is based. He was the first to lose confidence in man – starting with his own self-confidence – but also, through form and fantasy, the first to “reconstruct man in opposition to nature in an objective and material way.”<sup>193</sup> These two strategies of the visual pursuit of nature – form on the one hand and fantasy or dream on the other – generated, according to Segi, the two main schools of contemporary painting, namely abstraction and Surrealism.<sup>194</sup> Therefore, underlying both major opposing trends of contemporary painting, the decisive factor is always the necessity of coming to terms with the power of matter over man: “in figurative as in non-figurative painting, if we investigate each of them, what we find is matter, and even more, the material fixation of man.”<sup>195</sup> Even formalism is thus portrayed as reducible to a concern with matter. And, more than that, both of these two schools deal with materiality in a negative, escapist manner. They represent different attempts to escape Cézanne’s fundamental perception of the power of matter.

For Segi, the “problem of man” – and its inherent relationship to materiality – lies in the basis of even the most purely abstract painting. Mondrian’s notion of non-figuration, he argues, “throws away the external appearance and peculiarities of ‘man’, rather than eliminating man itself.”<sup>196</sup> On the contrary, man is reduced to its essential features, in an attempt to represent “humanity” (*ningensei*) rather than men or humans (*ningen*). According to Segi, in Mondrian this representation happens mainly through

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<sup>193</sup> Segi, “Kaiga ni okeru ningen no mondai [The Problem of Man in Painting],” p. 38.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

the blank space rather than through form itself. This essential representation of man is the fundamental goal of the neutrality of non-figurative art as a method, a “deeply Hegelian perspective on art,” which follows the view expressed in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* of the artist’s virtue as the “ability to close himself off in individual freedom vis-à-vis the contradictions of reality.”<sup>197</sup> However, Segi claims that Mondrian, like Hegel, did not understand sufficiently the problem of man’s material reality. Ultimately, there is no neutral method to express humanity. Such a method is not viable precisely because of man’s fundamental material determination.

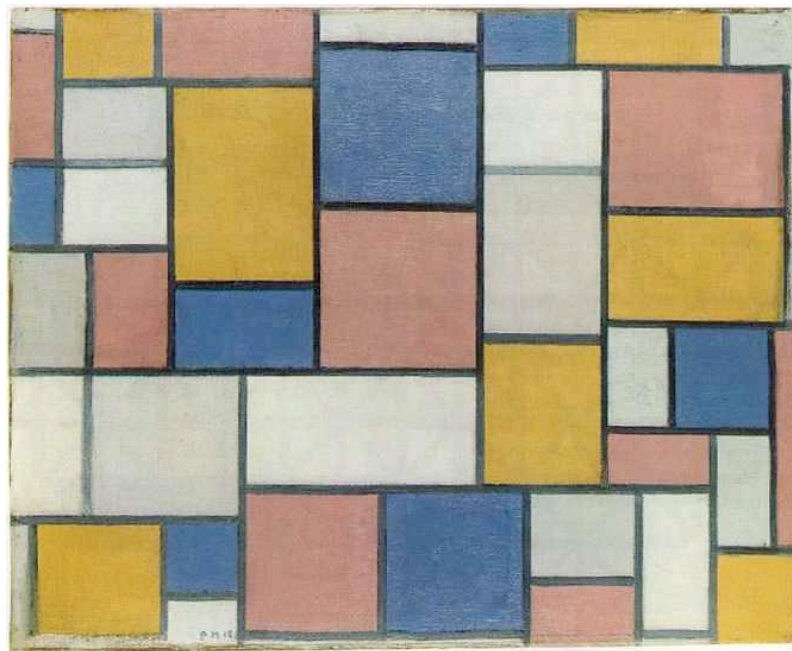


Figure 140. Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Color Planes and Grey Lines I*, 1918

Albeit frequently mistaken for a representation of merely subjective, psychological phenomena, Surrealism should also be understood as a search for material reality, namely a more faithful perception of it than that which can be reached by consciousness. Segi writes: “Surrealism, because it departs from a search for the ‘world of imaginary and figurative irrationality’ of which consists the realm of the

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

subconscious, is often mistaken for a sort of subjectivism and psychologism.”<sup>198</sup> Nonetheless Breton himself clearly rejects such claims and affirms, on the contrary, that Surrealism “attempts to go even deeper into the grounds of reality and to become more clearly and passionately conscious of the world perceived by the senses and to express it.”<sup>199</sup> It is not a matter of looking for something in the “depths” of the unconscious, but rather an attempt of reaching a closer level of relationship with material reality, precisely by shutting off the barrier of consciousness. In this sense, writes Segi, “even the unconscious, as the result of the search for something below consciousness, is essentially something that looks onto matter.”<sup>200</sup> The Surrealists, he claims, “discovered that the impressions (*kandō*) that take place in the human spirit when it faces an object (*taishō*) are a function of the latent contents of the *objet*. Hence, the so-called representation of things is nothing else but the expression of the materialization or objectification of man through the unconscious.”<sup>201</sup> Surrealism’s significance in relation to the problem of man lies in its discovery of a free realm, liberated from the limitations imposed on consciousness by everyday life, in other words, in a sort of “spiritual liberation” of man.<sup>202</sup> However, if this spiritually liberated man does not attain the level of matter, Surrealism fails – in a different but analogous way to Mondrian – to sufficiently accomplish the relationship between man and matter. Dali, “who was never able to attain this relationship,”<sup>203</sup> comments Segi, went simply from materialism to metaphysics. In this case, Surrealism falls short of being a complete expression of man, remaining as its mere imagination.

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 44.



Figure 141. Salvador Dali, *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, 1937

As a search for the most adequate expression of man in his material determination, it is fundamentally the problem of realism that is at stake in Segi's discussion of the history of painting. It is the question of the painterly "creation of a new image of man and its material determination."<sup>204</sup> At this point, the problem of man in painting must refer, once again, to Engels' theory of realism: "The material determination of man that contemporary painting aims at is nothing other than Engels' classical proposition of realism as grasping 'typical characters in typical circumstances'."<sup>205</sup> Materiality is the decisive factor in the possibility of an understanding of man adequate to our contemporary society and culture. Realism, as the apprehension of "typical characters in typical circumstances," proposes to painting the task of expressing the new man in his material determination, that is, to appropriate the heightened position of matter in contemporary society into a new conception of man. In Segi's words: "The new man is what stands in 'the climatic

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

moment of this movement', shown by the historical development of material (society); and this is what contemporary painting should daringly represent on the canvas."<sup>206</sup>

Only when art genuinely embraces the material determination of man that characterizes contemporary society will it be able to fundamentally overcome the feeling of a "crisis of humanity" expressed by European intellectuals as diverse as Spengler and Valéry in the turn of the twentieth century; only in this way can art turn the deadly threat of materiality into man's own living power. Segi's concluding remarks are quite clear in this respect:

In the beginning of the text I mentioned that the astonishing development of matter, rather than bringing about the oppression of man, means an increase of man's power. But isn't precisely this new man, who acquired unlimited energy through social change (*shakai henkaku*), the figure of man in the youth of its humanity, what contemporary painting should describe?<sup>207</sup>

Within the context of the debates between avant-garde and realism in the 1950s, Segi's introduction of the problem of materiality in postwar art criticism realizes a triple maneuver. It recuperates the problem of realism, while justifying formal experimentation, and dismissing, by the same token, the notion of socialist realism. The idea of "painting the new man, in the youth of its humanity" – which also means in its intrinsic relation to materiality – is substituted for the socialist realist principle of showing life "truthfully, in its revolutionary development."<sup>208</sup> In this sense, one would be justified in claiming that it was an example of what can be termed the "materialist realism" conceptualized by Segi in 1953 what Haryū recognized in

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> This basic principle of socialist realism was restated numerous times in slightly different formulations, as in Stalin's address to the Soviet writers in 1932: "An artist must above all portray life truthfully. And if he shows our life truthfully, on its way to socialism, that will be socialist realism;" quoted in Irina Gutkin, *The Cultural Origins of Socialist Realist Aesthetic, 1890-1934* (Evanston: Northwestern U Press, 1999), p. 38.

*Informel* a few years later, in a text whose title “Matter and Man” makes almost explicit the reference to “The Problem of Man in Painting.”

### **The Matter of Painting**

Published in the art journal *Mizue* in January 1957, Haryū’s “Matter and Man” evaluates the “situation of contemporary art” in the immediate aftermath of the epoch-making exhibition “Art of Today’s World.” The exhibition, organized by Okamoto Tarō and the Art Club, took place at Takashimaya Department Store, in downtown Tokyo, in 1956, and displayed for the first time in Japan the French paintings of the so-called *Informel* School. As discussed in the first chapter, the exhibition’s impact was so strong that it is almost impossible to narrate the history of 1950s art in Japan without accounting for its effects in the subsequent development of the postwar avant-gardes. One should note as well that – despite the internationalist pretension of the exhibition’s title – the organizers conferred a widely unbalanced privilege on French art, and within the exhibition, *Informel* clearly occupied the center of the stage. In fact, Haryū grounds his assessment of the situation of contemporary art at the time almost entirely on that exhibition, and particularly on the works by the *Informel* group: “[A]mong the many international art exhibitions which took place since the end of the war, none was able to express an actually emerging new spirit and, thus reveal to me a ‘situation’ as much as the recent ‘Art of Today’s World’.”<sup>209</sup>

The “situation” (*jōkyō*) revealed by those paintings went far beyond their “social conditions” or an “art-historical panorama.” They brought to light a “historical crisis, in which the subsistence of art, and of man itself, is incessantly put into question.”<sup>210</sup> Something radically new had come into sight, and a new “spirit” was

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<sup>209</sup> Haryū, “Busshitsu to ningen [Matter and Man],” p. 43.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

emerging through the paintings of those “most avant-garde works from each country, which now for the first time appeared before us” – and, among those, “most especially through the works of the *Informel* School.”<sup>211</sup> According to Haryū, *Informel* could not be contained in mere stylistic definitions. It constituted “no longer a mode or technique that can be called ‘tachisme’ or ‘caligraphisme’, but a movement that aims at a vivid, spontaneous recuperation of the spirit (*seishin*).”<sup>212</sup> He stressed that the strictly art-historical determination of *Informel* in terms of a critique of the increasingly scientific and academic character of geometric abstraction was insufficient to fully account for the philosophical significance and revolutionary impetus of that movement.

Haryū connects the historical significance of *Informel* to its alleged origins under World War II, as an art of the French resistance against the German occupation in the early 1940s: “That such an expression was born from the experience of the French *resistance*, which had to face the cruel force of destiny that tortures humanity, is a significant point to be considered in relation to the philosophical (*shisōteki*) basis of *Informel*”<sup>213</sup> The political context under which painters like Jean Fautrier and Jean Dubuffet produced the works out of which originated Tapié’s conception of *Informel* is extremely significant to Haryū’s appraisal of the movement, and more broadly to the general reception of those works in Japan. As Haryū remarks, “when considering the situation of French art today, the many outcomes and expressions of the wartime experience is one of the questions we cannot overlook.”<sup>214</sup> A wide range of political positions characterized French artists under the German occupation and the Vichy government. Members of the group of Twenty Young Painters of French Tradition

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.



(*Vingt Jeunes Peintres de Tradition Française*), such as Jean René Bazaine, adopted a nationalist stance, and attempted to protect putatively traditional French values from Nazi barbarism: “Because [such painters] attempted to preserve the French artistic tradition and humanity against the Nazis and the barbarism of war, they tried to see in the whole transformation of painting since Cézanne a denial of perspectival painting and a recovery of the tradition of *France Primitive*.”<sup>215</sup>



Figure 142. Jean Bazaine, *Swimmers in the Wave*, 1942

However, according to Haryū, this nostalgic, fundamentally reactive position was not enough to voice a true art of resistance; an entirely new mode of painterly expression was necessary, and this was the great achievement of Fautrier and Dubuffet. Not through the affirmation of lost traditional values, but by a radical

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

negation of the whole tradition of European painting itself, they were able to express the crisis in its essence and, simultaneously, provide the means to overcome it. Haryū writes:

Possibly, in order to transform this situation into something new, one needs the firm determination to observe all irrationalities of reality and the dismantling of man within it, along with the simultaneous resolve to thoroughly objectify oneself. The *Informel* works, which appeared after the “intermission show” of “Non-Figurative” or New Figuration, transmit to us this prediction. No doubt, there starts the true art of the Resistance.<sup>216</sup>



Figure 143. Jean Fautrier, *Remains (La Depouille)*, 1945

Commenting on Tapié’s discussion of *Informel* in the seminal essay *Another Art (Un Art Autre)*,<sup>217</sup> Haryū observes how Tapié’s rejection of the history of painting since cubism unfolds on the grounds of a deeply anti-humanist position. By rejecting modern European painting, *Informel* denies “the pressuposition of harmony between

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>217</sup> Cf. Tapié, *Un Art Autre [Another Art]*.

nature and man,” which remains untouched in cubism and its successors. “Even Picasso’s overwhelming ability, because of this humanistic sentiment, does not overcome classicism as much as it appears,” asserts Haryū.<sup>218</sup> As testimony of the atrocities and sufferings of World War II, *Informel* carried to the extreme the experience of the ruin of European civilization and the total discrediting of humanism with it:

This drastic anti-humanism, on the one hand, leads him to deny the course from cubism to geometric abstraction, and on the other, awakes his interest on the art of Egypt, Mexico and Africa, as well as on the European esoteric tradition. According to him, by inheriting as it is the classicist legacy of the principles of composition, proportion, rhythm, etc., cubism remains a merely external revolution, and by becoming geometric becomes all the more formalistic.<sup>219</sup>

The notion of an art of the French Resistance carried complex resonances among left-wing critics and artists in postwar Japan. On the one hand, it indirectly raised the issue of the artists’ war responsibility and the sensitive problem of war painting. The importance attributed by Haryū himself to “war painting” (*sensō-ga*) as the unspoken origin of Japanese postwar art in *The Rise and Fall of Postwar Art* should not be forgotten in relation to his embrace of *Informel* in 1957.<sup>220</sup> On the other hand, the humanist values rejected by *Informel* were seen by some as the basis of 1930s fascism, but also of the dominant ideology of postwar Japan, throughout and after the American Occupation. One can imagine the political appeal of *Informel* among a young generation of critics who, like Haryū himself, started their activities after the war and were eager to confront the political past and present of Japan – as well as that of the previous generation of artists and critics.

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Cf. Haryū, *Sengo bijutsu seisuishu* [*The Rise and Fall of Postwar Art*], pp. 20-34.

Departing from a negation of European art (and of Western civilization itself) it seemed natural that among previous artistic movements of the twentieth century it was Dada that Tapié regarded as the most important heritage for *Informel*. Precisely because of its radically destructive attitude towards the classic European artistic tradition, Haryū comments: “Tapié seems to attribute to Dada the most important significance. In Dada’s gratuitous adventure and anti-aesthetical destructive acts he seems to perceive the most spontaneous exchange between spirit and things (*buttai*). And I think this is what shapes the peculiar character of the *Informel* movement.”<sup>221</sup> Nevertheless, Haryū does not fail to recognize that, differently from Dada, Tapié’s notion of an “other art” signaled the possibility of what he cogently describes as an “agreement between the traces (*kiseki*) of action (*kōdō*) and the structure of art.”<sup>222</sup> By doing so, *Informel* reinserted Dada into the “mechanisms that determine man and society,” and thereby reappropriated its destructive impetus into a form of artistic expression.



Figure 144. George Mathieu painting, 1957 (photo by Dmitri Kassel)

<sup>221</sup> Haryū, “Busshitsu to ningen [Matter and Man],” p. 46.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

Haryū acknowledges *Informel*'s debt towards Surrealism, but stresses a few fundamental discrepancies between the two. He cites Tapié's reproach of Surrealism for remaining classic in regard to structure and thus "not overcoming organic morphology," and references Mathieu's rejection of the stability of the Surrealist notion of the unconscious. One can see here a major difference between Haryū's interpretation of Surrealism (which agrees with that of Tapié) as fundamentally subjectivist and Segi's perspective on its notion of the unconscious as an immediate relationship to matter. According to Haryū, the attempt to express a reality that transcended subjectivity constituted a major difference between *Informel* and Surrealism. *Informel*'s dismissal of rationality was not done in favor of the liberation of some sort of unconscious reality, as he perceived to be the case in Surrealism. In contrast to Surrealism's emphasis on the irrational unconscious, Haryū saw in *Informel* a turn to the irrationality of the outside world, of materiality itself. He writes:

[E]ven calling it "spontaneous painting" and using automatism as a method to a lesser or greater extent, instead of expressing a sort of depth psychology (*shinsō shinrigaku*) or world of instinct like Surrealism, [*Informel*] attempts to reach the appearance of a transcendent force. In other words, instead of the irrationality of the inner world it searches for the irrationality of the outside world. That many *Informel* artists have abandoned all fixed forms of abstraction and figuration and made space and matière into one sole function is not simply a matter of the effect of the painting or a stylistic concern, but because they see therein the point of interlace between the material world and the supernatural world.<sup>223</sup>

Haryū attributes the rejection of Surrealism by *Informel* artists, along with their attempt to recuperate Dada to their strongly anti-humanist proclivities, which had to do away with the still overly subjective character of Surrealism. The attempt by *Informel* to reconsider Dada in its difference from Surrealism is seen by Haryū as the "search for a path to material reality outside." Instead of the still all too human and

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

subjective Surrealist logic of dreams and unconscious reality, *Informel* introduced the concrete materiality of the world outside the subject, in place of the classic harmony between man and nature, the direct relationship between act and matter, independent from human subjectivity.

### **Beyond form**

In *Informel*'s recourse to the expressive potential of the materiality of painting, Haryū identified its privileged mode of relationship to material reality. For him, the thick patches of paint in *Informel* canvases played a fundamental role in its new mode of expression – even more important than the function of color and form. Through the use of oil paint not only as color but fundamentally as mass, the very flatness and two-dimensionality of painting are put in check. The word used in Japanese to designate the matter of oil paint as an expressive element is *matieeru*, a straightforward adaptation of the French *matière*. According to Haryū, the *matieeru* of *Informel* painting communicates something to the viewer in a way that is radically different from color and form. It works in a fundamentally different manner from the process of signification. Haryū mentions “the solid space constructed by [Jean Paul] Riopelle, like a mosaic, with a *matieeru* with edges as sharp as steel. Here, this overwhelming mass of matter (*busshitsu*) is directly connected to a dynamic, intense life energy.”<sup>224</sup> At this point, the sharp *matieeru* of the first sentence becomes the mass of matter (*busshitsu*) of the second, which is perceived by Haryū as “directly connected” to the intense energy expressed by the canvas. In this smooth passage from a descriptive discourse on *matieeru* to the philosophical problem of matter as such (*busshitsu*) lies the core of Haryū's interpretation of *Informel*. The translation of *matieeru* into

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p. 43-4.



*busshitsu* is what allows for the translation of a strictly art-critical discourse into the broader philosophical – and political – camp. While following Tapié’s discussion of the problem of *matière* in *Another Art*, Haryū’s introduction of the politically charged notion of *busshitsu* implicitly opens up the discussion to a much broader political context.



Figure 145. Jean Dubuffet, *Busy Life*, 1953

*Informel*’s recourse to matter as an expressive means implied, moreover, a critique of the notion of form as the central element of painterly expression. This critique of a conception of art centered on the notion of *zōkei* is a crucial point in Haryū’s interpretation of *Informel*. The term *zōkei* is composed by the addition of *zō* (造 - to make, produce, build) and *kei* or *katachi* (形 - form, shape, figure). Combined with the noun *bijutsu* (art), in *zokei bijutsu*, it is the conventional translation of the German *bildende Künste*: “plastic” or, more literally, “formative arts.” Haryū writes:

Even if its immediate motif can be seen in a revolt against the academicization of abstract and non-figurative art, it has deeper roots. In brief, against the view of *zōkei*, which had been the basis for the overcoming of naturalism in post-cubist art, isn't this movement in the process of building a new aesthetics and new worldview that prompts a radical reexamination?<sup>225</sup>

The critique of *zōkei* referred to here by Haryū is thus a critique of the importance of form as the fundamental locus of meaning in the visual arts. In this sense, the novelty of *Informel* would consist in proposing a new mode of painterly expression that no longer relied upon the vocabulary and grammar of *zōkei*, that is, on the construction of form as the main carrier of meaning. By detaching itself from the level of *zōkei*, that is, of form-building, *Informel* inaugurated an entirely new possibility of painterly expression – no longer through form and color, but through the materiality of paint itself. It thus initiated a “new paradigm of expression,” as Haryū terms it in *The Rise and Fall of Postwar Art*.

The critique of *zōkei* celebrated by Haryū in *Informel* rejects precisely the role of form as the central element of painting that constitutes the core of Pedrosa's conceptualization of the political potential of abstract art. In *Informel* painting – which Pedrosa regarded as a mere romantic and regressive expression of subjectivity – Haryū recognized the emergence of a new paradigm of expression “from the midst of the formless chaos of a direct clash between act and matter.”<sup>226</sup> However, by rejecting form, it is also the fundamental political potential of painting that *Informel* renounces. And it does so while maintaining its own status as canvas painting, that is, as an object of visual contemplation. *Informel* stands thus in an ambiguous position between the politics of abstraction of 1950s painting and the radical negation of autonomy by the art of the early 1960s. While realizing itself as a “direct clash between act and matter,” it still signals the possibility of “agreement between the traces (*kiseki*) of action (*kōdō*)

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>226</sup> Haryū, *Sengo bijutsu seisuishī* [*The Rise and Fall of Postwar Art*], p. 102.



and the structure of art,<sup>227</sup> namely by preserving its final result as canvas painting. In this sense, *Informel*'s materialism, in a similar fashion to Feuerbach's, still conceives of reality and sensuousness in terms of objectivity and contemplation.

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<sup>227</sup> Haryū, "Busshitsu to ningen [Matter and Man]," p. 47.

## CHAPTER 4

### BEYOND *INFORMEL*



Figure 146. Jean Fautrier, *Surface Colorée, Tableau à 4 côtés*  
(Colored Surface, Picture with Four Sides), 1958

“All the questions concerning today’s painting must depart from a clear consciousness of the dangerous turning point (*kiken-na magari-kado*) in which we find ourselves after *Informel*.”<sup>228</sup> With this forthright verdict on the contemporary situation of art, Miyakawa opens his debut art critical essay, “After *Informel*” (*Anforumeru ikō*), published in the art journal *Bijutsu techō* in June 1963. Implicitly drawing upon Haryū

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<sup>228</sup> Miyakawa Atsushi, “Anforumeru ikō [After *Informel*]” in *Bijutsu techō* (June 1963); reprinted in Miyakawa Atsushi, *Miyakawa Atsushi chosakushū* [Selected Writings by Miyakawa Atsushi], vol. 2, p. 16.

Ichirō's analyses of the role of materiality in *Informel* painting,<sup>229</sup> Miyakawa takes its philosophical and historical implications a step further and discerns in *Informel* the emergence of a new era of artistic expression beyond the modern paradigm. Months before the sudden interruption of the annual "Yomiuri Independent Exhibition"<sup>230</sup> and in the midst of heated debates among Tokyo-based artists and critics about the notion of "anti-art" (*han-geijutsu*),<sup>231</sup> Miyakawa steps back from the immediate present and attempts to locate in the 1940s and 1950s works of French painters such as Jean Fautrier and Jean Dubuffet the grounds for a philosophically informed understanding of the contemporary situation. In spite of its ostensibly historical character, Miyakawa's assessment of *Informel* in the early 1960s cannot be dissociated from such endeavors to critically position himself vis-à-vis the local artistic production of the present.

By examining the so-called "anti-art" tendencies of 1960s Japan from the perspective of *Informel* understood as the emerging paradigm of contemporary art, Miyakawa's fundamental insights regarding the question of contemporaneity acquire a paradoxically conservative edge. The 1963 essay falls short of recognizing the limits of *Informel* – which ultimately failed to overcome the quintessentially modern medium of the painted canvas – as well as the new possibilities inaugurated by the experiments in performance and object-based art in early 1960s Japan and elsewhere.

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<sup>229</sup> While "After Informel" contains no reference to Haryū, five months later, in "Henbō no suii: Montaju-fu ni [A History of Change: In Montage-like Compilation]," Miyakawa is clear about the importance of Haryū's interpretation of *Informel* for his own perspective on the matter.

<sup>230</sup> The annual "Yomiuri Independent Exhibition" was abruptly discontinued in 1963.

<sup>231</sup> See for instance Tōno Yoshiaki, et al. "Han-kaiga, han-chōkoku, han-hihyō [Anti-painting, anti-sculpture, anti-criticism]" in *Mizue* n. 660 (April 1960), pp. 77-84; also "Han-geijutsu' wo meguru ronsō [A debate concerning 'Anti-Art'] in *Asahi jaanaru* (3 April 1960), p. 56. For a discussion of the topic see also Tomii Reiko, "Geijutsu on their minds. Memorable Words on Anti-Art" in *Art Anti-Art Non-Art*, exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles: The Getty Institute, 2007).

In the years that followed, Miyakawa implicitly addresses this failure through closer examination of the phenomenon of anti-art, whose philosophical stakes he interprets in another widely influential essay published 1964 as a “descent to the everyday.”<sup>232</sup>



Figure 147. Yoshimura Masunobu advertising the third exhibition of Neo-Dada Organizers in Ginza, Tokyo, 1960.

Miyakawa’s role within the Japanese intellectual circles of the 1960s exceeded the sphere of art criticism. Having spent his childhood and youth between Paris and Tokyo, he was one of the first to introduce French intellectuals such as Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot to the Japanese intellectual milieu. Among art critics, Miyakawa was recurrently reproached for privileging theoretical speculation over

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<sup>232</sup> Miyakawa Atsushi, “Han-geijutsu: sono nichijō-sei e no kakō [Anti-Art: Its descent to the everyday]” in *Bijutsu techō*, no. 234 (April 1964); reprinted in Miyakawa Atsushi, *Miyakawa Atsushi chosakushū* [*Selected Writings by Miyakawa Atsushi*], vol. 2, pp.87-96.

engagement with actual artworks (*sakuhin-ron*). But his boldness to propose a radical interpretation of the art-historical present combined with remarkable essayistic talent guaranteed him a highly influential position in the history of Japanese art criticism and theory.

This chapter highlights Miyakawa's crucial insights concerning the emergence of a new temporality of art in the early 1960s, while simultaneously pointing out his failure to recognize the fundamental limits of *Informel* painting. I subsequently examine how, shortly after his intensive engagement with *Informel*, in his influential formulation of anti-art's "descent to the everyday," a significant change can be noticed in Miyakawa's perception of the art of his time. The tendency of what Miyakawa terms the "*objetification*" of art in the early 1960s, whose significance he downplayed in "*After Informel*," becomes the center of his argument concerning anti-art's blurring of the boundaries between art and non-art.

### **The emergence of *gendai***

According to Miyakawa, our ideas about art are so fundamentally grounded in a modern conceptual framework, that any form of expression exceeding the limits of the modern conception of art must necessarily face doubt concerning its very identity as a work of art. "Whenever we say 'art'," he writes, "whenever we say 'work' or whenever we say 'creation', whether consciously or not, we are inevitably speaking within the context of modernity."<sup>233</sup> Therefore, suppose our received notions about art are no longer adequate to account for the transformations that have been taking place since *Informel*, "suppose the various attempts of contemporary expression take place outside the context of modernity: we can no longer positively apprehend their

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<sup>233</sup> Miyakawa, "Anforumeru ikō [*After Informel*]," p. 16.

actuality, as it is always followed by a certain suspension of judgment – ‘Is this really art?’ – or a sort of negative recognition.”<sup>234</sup> Vis-à-vis those expressive attempts that “take place outside the context of modernity,” the need for a decision between two interpretive positions emerges for critical discourse: one must choose between their “negative recognition” – and thereby ultimately resort to some variation of the notion of anti-art as a description of such expressive attempts – or the said “suspension of judgment” (and here it is not by chance the Miyakawa implicitly utilizes Edmund Husserl’s notion of *Urteilsenthaltung*)<sup>235</sup> – the path chosen by Miyakawa himself – leading to a questioning of the very mode of being of art after modernity.

However, for Miyakawa, it was precisely this radical questioning of the present situation of art that seemed absent from the art-critical discourse of his day. And the very “danger” he attributed to *Informel* as a “turning point” in the history of artistic expression was intrinsically connected to the general lack of consciousness about the deeper historical significance of that movement. What was dangerous about the radical transformation of art that took place with *Informel* was thus, most of all, the risk of its going unquestioned and ignored: the fact that “although there has never been a time that demands fundamental questioning as much as today, no one dares to pose the question.”<sup>236</sup> Because posing the question “What is art?” in an explicit manner constituted for Miyakawa the fundamental task of art criticism, it was above all an insufficiency of criticism that he pointed out as the shortcoming of his contemporary situation.

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-17.

<sup>235</sup> Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie [Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy]* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1993), pp. 53-6.

<sup>236</sup> Miyakawa Atsushi, “Anforumeru ikō [After *Informel*],” p. 16.

The difficulty in grasping the contemporary situation of art was enhanced by an inherent ambiguity in the very notions of the “modern” (*kindai*) and “contemporary” (*gendai*) as understood in 1960s Japan. In order to understand the advent of *gendai* in its full significance, Miyakawa claimed, it was first of all necessary to extricate the tangled meanings of the “modern” and “contemporary.” The problem acquires a further layer of complexity in his differentiation between a general conception of *contemporain* (in French in the original) and a strong sense of the contemporary, to which he refers with the Japanese adjectival noun *gendai*. In what is perhaps the most renowned passage of “After *Informel*,” Miyakawa formulates the fundamental anxiety of his art-historical present:

To put it in a paradoxical way, we have reached a time in which it is no longer possible for us – who have for too long spoken of the contemporary (*contemporain*) as a synonym of the modern – to relegate *gendai* to the general conception of *contemporain*; not only this, but also a time in which it is necessary, so to say, to redeem in advance *gendai* from within the *contemporain*.<sup>237</sup>

What is necessary is, hence, to redeem a strong sense of the contemporary – as *gendai* – from within the vague notion of *contemporain* and its ambiguous relationship to the modern. Only by starting in this way can one proceed to the actual questioning of the meaning of the contemporary itself in its difference vis-à-vis the modern. Only so can one reach a point from where to make sense of the “various attempts of contemporary expression.”

At this point, one might be tempted to connect Miyakawa’s discussion of *gendai* to the problem of contemporaneity as I have discussed earlier on in the dissertation. In fact, Reiko Tomii takes this path when discussing the significance of a certain “perception of contemporaneity,” discernible among artists working in the

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

periphery but not so much among those working in centers like New York City. Tomii suggests a connection between Miyakawa's notion of the contemporary (*gendai*) and what she translates as the sense of "international contemporaneity" (*kokusai-teki dōjisei*) that surfaces in a number of critical examinations of the situation of art in 1960s and 1970s Japan.<sup>238</sup> However, she leaves open the crucial problem concerning what sort of connection might be postulated between the concepts of *gendai* and *dōjisei* apart from the semantic ambiguity of the word "contemporaneity" in English and other European languages. There is no hint that Miyakawa's notion of *gendai* (which he insistently attempts to distinguish from the French *contemporain*) implies any reference to the idea of simultaneity, or "occurring at the same time," which is precisely what the Japanese word *dōjisei* indicates. If a connection can be established between these two capital questions in the artistic discourse of the 1960s, it must go a long way, and tackle the relationship between the intrinsic temporality of the creative act and the understanding of historical temporality as such.

First and foremost, what is at stake in Miyakawa's determination of *gendai* is a paradigm shift between the "modern" and "contemporary" as what he calls "value-concepts" (*kachi-gainen*). In Miyakawa's words:

Surely, in opposition to modern art, people have already started to speak of contemporary (*gendai*) painting, but always in terms of a formal concept (*yōshiki-gainen*), as if a portion of modernity had separated itself from the rest like an accomplished fact. However, at the same time that modernity is a formal concept, it also realizes itself with the support of a value concept, as in the intense consciousness and sense of modernity that starts with Baudelaire.<sup>239</sup>

In an essay of the same period entitled "What is Modernity in Painting?," Miyakawa describes the different stages of the consciousness of modernity as a value-concept in

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<sup>238</sup> Cf. Reiko Tomii, "Historicizing 'Contemporary Art': Some Discursive Practices in *Gendai Bijutsu* in Japan" in *Positions* 12:3 (Winter 2004), p. 614.

<sup>239</sup> Miyakawa, "Anforumeru ikō [After *Informel*]," p. 17.



artistic expression since its inception in Baudelaire's critical diagnosis of the situation of painting in nineteenth-century Paris.<sup>240</sup> Granted that in post-revolutionary France "modernity had certainly already started," it is nonetheless Baudelaire's acute perception of his moment as a time in which "a great tradition was lost and a new one was not yet born"<sup>241</sup> that inaugurates the *consciousness of modernity* as a new stage in the history of painting.



Figure 148. Eugène Delacroix, *The Abduction of Rebecca*, 1846

"What is Modernity in Painting?" starts with a quote of Baudelaire's dramatic statement before the paintings of the Parisian Salon of 1846: "We find ourselves, as one can see, at the hospital of painting. We touch the wounds and illnesses; and this

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<sup>240</sup> Miyakawa Atsushi. "Kaiga ni okeru kindai towa nanika [What is Modernity in Painting?]" in *Bijutsu-shi to sono gensetsu/discours* [*Art History and its Discourse*] (Tokyo: Suidosha, 2002), pp. 9-22.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

one is not among the least strange and least contagious.”<sup>242</sup> A little over a hundred years later, in 1963 Tokyo, it is just as if Miyakawa pictured himself in Baudelaire’s position, and, standing before the “anti-artworks” of the Yomiuri Independent, uttered once again the same fateful words: “We find ourselves at the hospital of painting...” And, just as Baudelaire inaugurated the consciousness of modernity in painting, through the diagnosis of the crisis of painting after *Informel*, Miyakawa attempts to ground the consciousness of a new epoch in the history of art, whose fundamental stakes had until then escaped the understanding of critics.

Miyakawa’s theoretical remedy to the pervasive lack of questioning in art criticism could not be other than a radical inquiry into the meaning of art and expression itself. Only through the suspension of our received modern notions of art – and, by extension, of anti-art – would it be possible to inquire into the real stakes of painting after *Informel* and thus to understand the radical transformation it operates in the paradigm of artistic expression. To do so, what Miyakawa proposes is nothing other than a “phenomenological bracketing” of art:

What seems important is rather, so to say, a phenomenological bracketing (*genshōgakuteki kakko-ire*) of art – including anti-art. But then, what we have before us is nothing other than the expressive act. So, on the basis of that premise, my prognostic would be the following: if it is the case that we are confronted with something like a turning point after *Informel*, beyond the dimension of expression itself (*hyōgen*), it is more than anything a change in the dimension of the ontology of expression (*hyōgenron*).<sup>243</sup>

Only by means of a phenomenological reduction of art itself, that is, through the bracketing of our received – modern – conceptions of “art” can one envisage the dimension in which a paradigm shift takes place after *Informel*. According to

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<sup>242</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “Le Salon de 1846” quoted by Miyakawa in “Kaiga ni okeru kindai towa nanika [What is Modernity in Painting?],” p. 9.

<sup>243</sup> Miyakawa, “Anforumeru ikō [After *Informel*],” p. 23-4.

Miyakawa, what is left after the process of phenomenological bracketing of art is nothing other than the raw reality of what he calls the “expressive act” (*hyōgen kōi*). At this point, Miyakawa implicitly borrows from Heidegger’s distinction between an ontic (*sonzaiteki*) and ontological (*sonzaironteki*) level of investigation<sup>244</sup> to describe the fundamental meaning of the transformation that takes place with Informel. The turning point of *Informel* must be thus located in the dimension of the ontological constitution of expression (*hyōgenron*), as opposed to a mere transformation in the mode of expression.

### **Terror in Painting**

Miyakawa ascribes to critics in Europe and Japan who saw in *Informel* nothing other than an endeavor to liberate painting from all convention in view of immediate subjective expression a failure in apprehending the paradigm shift of contemporary art. “From Herbert Read to Georges Duthuit and Pierre Restany,” he writes, “whether they affirm or reject it, for many art critics *Informel* is nothing other than immediate self-expression that has eliminated all convention in reaction to the academism of abstract art.”<sup>245</sup> In Segi Shinichi’s description of *Informel* as an attempt to “immediately express (*chokusetsu-ni hyōshutsu suru*) man’s inner feelings” Miyakawa finds the most typical formulation of this view of *Informel* as a quest for the “Romantic myth” of perfect self-expression.<sup>246</sup>

Miyakawa argues that the idea of a search for immediate self-expression reduces *Informel* to a painterly version of the tendency identified by the French critic

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<sup>244</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

<sup>245</sup> Miyakawa, “Anforumeru ikō [After *Informel*],” p. 18.

<sup>246</sup> Segi Shinichi, “Chūshō geijutsu no kanōsei [The Possibility of Abstract Art]” in *Bijutsu techō*, special issue (April 1960), quoted in “Anforumeru ikō [After *Informel*],” p.18.

Jean Paulhan in 1941 as “terror in literature” (*terreur dans les lettres*).<sup>247</sup> Paulhan’s 1941 essay, *The Flowers of Tarbes*, recognizes in the literature of the early twentieth century the trend of a radical rejection of all traces of rhetoric and conventional formulas in view of a pure and transparent language, capable of expressing feelings and ideas in a fresh, immediate manner. However, Paulhan argues that such a drastic refusal of convention and rhetoric ultimately amounts to a *rejection of words* – and therefore of language itself – in favor of pure ideas. As Paulhan observes: “Terror commonly accepts that ideas are worth more than words, and the spiritual worth more than the material.” Language, on the other hand, – itself inevitably a form of convention – is regarded by “Terrorists” as “essentially dangerous for thought.”<sup>248</sup> It is Miyakawa’s claim that, in an analogous way, *Informel* has been generally understood as a denial of the whole set of established conventions of abstract painting, in view of a pure expression of subjective contents or feelings of the painter.

Following Paulhan, Miyakawa describes as a form of “untimely Bergsonism” the attempt of pure self-expression attributed to *Informel* by most critics. In *The Flowers of Tarbes*, Paulhan recognized in Bergson the metaphysical mentor of a whole generation of “terrorist writers” of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He discerns in Bergson’s philosophy a denunciation of language as the crust that hinders the mind’s relationship to the world, and in his writings on literature and criticism a call to break away from the linguistic chains that tie the human spirit:

Our inner life, if we are to believe Bergson, cannot be expressed without leaving behind everything that is most precious about it. Our mind is, at every point, oppressed by language. And every man, if he wants to get to his authentic thought, must eventually break through a crust of words that very

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<sup>247</sup> Jean Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes or, Terror in Literature*. Trans. Michael Syrotinski (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

quickly hardens again, and of which commonplace expressions, clichés, and conventions are merely the most obvious forms.<sup>249</sup>

The picture of Bergson developed by Paulhan from a number of his sparse thoughts on literary aesthetics is certainly rather one-sided. However, this privilege of the subject's inner experience also constitutes the basis of Bergson's crucial considerations on time as *duration*. The notion of duration, understood as our inner experience of time, writes Bergson in *Time and Free Will*, must be purified from all it owes "to the intrusion of the sensible world and, in a word, to the obsession with the idea of space."<sup>250</sup> "In order to view the self in its original purity," he emphasizes, "psychology ought to eliminate or correct certain forms which bear the obvious mark of the external world."<sup>251</sup> While Paulhan's (and Miyakawa's) interpretation of Bergson is rather reductive in attributing to him merely another form of radical subjectivism, one must recognize that the risk of such an interpretation is clearly present in Bergson's writings themselves.

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>250</sup> Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will. An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. Trans. F. L. Pogson (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971), p. 224.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.



Figure 149. Imai Toshimitsu, *Black and White*, 1955

Bergsonism or not, a clear instance of the understanding of *Informel* as an instance of what Miyakawa called “terror in painting” can be observed in a 1959 article by Mário Pedrosa, revealingly entitled “From Abstraction to Self-Expression.”<sup>252</sup> Albeit for entirely different reasons from those informing Paulhan’s criticism of “terror,” Pedrosa is not less emphatic in his rejection of immediate self-expression as an aesthetic principle for painting. “Today’s abstract painting, called Informal or Tachist,” he explains, “intends itself as a product of the mere explosion of

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<sup>252</sup> Mário Pedrosa, “Da abstração à auto-expressão [From Abstraction to Self-expression]” in *Mundo, Homem, Arte em Crise* [*Man, World, Art in Crisis*], pp. 35-47.

energies released inside the painter.”<sup>253</sup> On this level of direct expression, Pedrosa claims, painting possesses the lowest possible degree of what the American psychologist Edward Bullough theorized in terms of a “psychical distance” vis-à-vis the work of art.<sup>254</sup> The work of art “cannot mix into everyday life, into the level of social obligations, of a party we attend, or some kind of violence we suffer.”<sup>255</sup> In order for a work of art to conserve its autonomy, it must necessarily maintain a certain distance in relation to the subjective, personal concerns of both the “individual who made it and the subject who contemplates it.”<sup>256</sup>

Pedrosa’s rejection of *Informel* ultimately relies on a fundamental belief in the notion of disinterestedness, on the need for a disinterested attitude vis-à-vis the work of art – from both the spectator and the artist. By eliminating this distance on the side of the artist and aiming at an immediate relationship between the painter and his or her work, *Informel* painting loses the basic qualities “necessary to an autonomous work of art,” the fundamental conditions for it to become more than a mere “human document” or a “range of pure psychical manifestations of the author.”<sup>257</sup>

In view of the general interpretation of *Informel* in terms a subjectivist approach to artistic expression, one might wonder how Miyakawa justifies his attribution to it of a radical rupture with the subjective character of expression itself, rather than another instance of the return of an old Romantic or modern myth. However, while Pedrosa’s and Restany’s perspectives on *Informel* can indeed be said to conform to Miyakawa’s description of the general view of the movement among

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>254</sup> Cf. Ed Bullough, “‘Psychical Distance’ as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle” in *British Journal of Psychology* 5 (1912), pp. 87-98, 108-117.

<sup>255</sup> Pedrosa, “Da abstração à auto-expressão [From Abstraction to Self-expression],” p. 37.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., p. 37-8.

critics, one must note that this interpretation was not as pervasive and generally accepted as Miyakawa claims. Precisely within Japanese art criticism in the 1950s, a different reception of *Informel* that stressed its relationship with materiality had been delineated, which constitutes the unacknowledged basis of Miyakawa's philosophical argument. In order to confer a more dramatic character to the contrast between his own interpretation of *Informel* as the emergence of contemporary painting and those critics who remained attached to the modern paradigm of expression, Miyakawa omits in "After *Informel*" any mention to Haryū's perspective on the problem of materiality, as well as to Segi Shinichi's earlier discussions of materiality in "The Question of Man in Painting." And it is precisely through a close examination of the question of materiality that Miyakawa constructs his argument concerning *Informel* painting as the emerging of a new paradigm of expression and a new temporality of art.

### **Matter and Temporality**

Against the definition of *Informel* aesthetics based solely on its rejection of form and convention, Miyakawa points out that this negative aspect is accompanied by an increased role conferred to the materiality of painting. "If contemporary painting is characterized, on the one hand, by the total denial of modern art's system of form, on the other, it is also determined by a condition that can be called materialization (*bushitsu-ka*)."<sup>258</sup> He argues that around 1940 one can notice a general cultural shift "from form to matter" as the determinant factor of contemporary consciousness. While this process was taking place in the wide spectrum of cultural production, in the realm of painting it assumed an even sharper aspect, due to the relationship with materiality inherent to the very activity of painting: "If the change in values from form to matter,

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<sup>258</sup> Miyakawa, "Anforumeru ikō [After *Informel*]," p. 20.



verifiable to a higher or lesser degree in the whole of contemporary consciousness, appears the most distinctively in painting, it is for no other reason than the fact that painting can only take place through material (*busshitsuteki sozai*) and tools.<sup>259</sup> In *Informel* painting, matter (*busshitsu*) – which had been conceived until then as “mere material” (*sozai*) in the formative process – becomes apparent in its very materiality (*busshitsusei*). Matter shows itself thereby in its full potential: as that which it had always already been, but had remained persistently concealed under the guise of a mere means of expression. Miyakawa writes: “The material (*sozai*), which originally cannot be anything other than matter (*busshitsu*), had to become transparent to the point that its materiality became unnoticeable. Only now does the material overcome its role as mere material and attempt to affirm its own existence as matter.”<sup>260</sup>



Figure 150. Jean Fautrier in his studio at Châtenay-Malabry, France, 1955.

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., p. 18. At this point, Miyakawa’s opposition between material (*sozai*) and matter (*busshitsu*) reproduces the same dichotomy established by Yoshihara’s 1956 “Gutai Art Manifesto.”

The emergence of materiality takes place in consonance with the increased importance of the act of painting. The inherent expressive potential of matter “emerges as inseparable from the human act which sets matter in motion.”<sup>261</sup> According to Miyakawa, here lies the fundamental meaning of Restany’s reference to *Informel*’s inauguration of the “era of gesture.”<sup>262</sup> However, in contrast to Restany, who understands this gesture fundamentally as a “direct transmission” of the painter’s “sensible intuitions,”<sup>263</sup> Miyakawa rejects any notion of lyricism as the basis of *Informel* painting. The human gesture, as Miyakawa understands it, does not express any sort of deep internal content of the painter as subject. On the contrary, what it does is to bring to the surface the inherent signifying potential of matter itself. In this way, a crucial displacement of the *origin* of artistic expression and creation takes place: from the artist as subject to a relationship with matter. While this relationship with material reality had been conceived of in modernity as a mere *means* of expression, it now becomes the origin of expression itself. Whether one calls it *Informel*, *Abstract Expressionism* or *Action Painting*, what is at stake in this new mode of painterly expression is a situation in which “gesture illuminates the latent potential of matter (*matière*) and, somehow, matter realizes gesture.”<sup>264</sup> In this dialectics of gesture and materiality – which corresponds, according to Miyakawa, to “what Jackson Pollock refers to as that ‘give and take’”<sup>265</sup> – lies the ground for contemporary artistic expression.

Miyakawa locates the ground for *Informel*’s rejection of the modern system of form in a fundamental “value change (*kachi-tenkan*) in the very concept of

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Pierre Restany, *Lyrisme et Abstraction [Lyricism and Abstraction]* (Milano: Edizioni Apollinaire, 1960), p. 11.

<sup>264</sup> Miyakawa, “Anforumeru ikō [After *Informel*],” p. 26.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

expression,<sup>266</sup> namely, from the expression of pre-established subjective contents to expression as an end in itself. In its modern conception, Miyakawa argues, “expression is always the expression of something, and accordingly, the thing that must be expressed ... always precedes the expressive act.”<sup>267</sup> The notion of expression, whose etymological origin contains in itself the notion of “pushing out what is inside, naturally anticipates self-expression, and corresponds therefore to the modern view of man as interiority.”<sup>268</sup> With Romanticism, for the first time this notion of expression as self-expression becomes a decisive value-concept in art. By the same token, he continues, “when expression aims at the autonomy of expression itself, Romanticism’s much-expected child, modern art, is born”<sup>269</sup> Modern art would be thus nothing else than self-expression made autonomous, self-expression that detached itself from its subjective origin. The very notion of art’s autonomy, zealously protected by Pedrosa from the abuses of self-expression, is denounced here as a mere cover-up for the inherently – albeit frequently concealed – self-expressive nature of modern art in general.

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.



Figure 151. Jackson Pollock in Springs, NY, 1950

In *Informel*, on the other hand, far from a recuperation of the Romantic myth of pure self-expression, what takes place is a transformation in the notion of expression itself, according to Miyakawa. This transformation eliminates the notion of a previously existing content of expression, in such a way that “if one can still speak of a thing to be expressed, it can only emerge through the expressive act and in the expressive act itself.”<sup>270</sup> What is negated in *Informel* is hence not simply the modern system of form, “expressive convention or, in other words, modernity as a formal concept. ... Rather, this is, or should have been, a rupture that goes beyond the dimension of expression, being much more in the dimension of the ontology of

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

expression (*hyōgenron*).”<sup>271</sup> This idea of *Informel* as a transformation on the level of the “ontology of expression” (*hyōgenron*) is, so to say, the first outcome of Miyakawa’s phenomenological bracketing of art.

In consonance with the transformation in the concept of artistic expression, the dialectics of gesture and matter brings about an entirely new mode of temporality, which defines the very contemporaneity of art. For Miyakawa, *gendai* is not merely a new historical period in a chronological succession; it is a new beginning of time, a new time structure altogether. The dialectics of gesture and matter, Miyakawa writes, “realizes itself only in the dimension of the continuity of the act, according to each instant of this duration, and there a new time structure (*jikan kōzō*) emerges.”<sup>272</sup> Beyond the modern “time/space” scheme, “matter/duration” is the conceptual pair that defines the new temporality that emerges on the basis of the “transformation (*henbō*) of matter (*matière*).”<sup>273</sup>

After Miyakawa’s categorical denial of a return to Bergsonism in *Informel*, the introduction of the notion of “duration” as the defining character of the temporality of contemporary art might appear as a curious move, to say the least. However, as if trying to avoid any subjectivist tone in the notion of duration as the temporality of contemporary painting, Miyakawa avoids any direct mention of Bergson and, instead, explains his own understanding of duration in relation to Gaston Bachelard’s usage of the term. Through Bachelard, Miyakawa attempts to conceptualize *durée* no longer as

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>273</sup> In this context, I translate “matière” simply by “matter” because Miyakawa’s usage of the French term *matière* is less strict than other critics who restrict the term to its technical meaning in the context of painting.

the subject's internal experience of time, but precisely as a temporality that originates in the relationship between gesture and matter.<sup>274</sup>

Nonetheless, Bachelard's conception of duration is not as distant from subjectivism as Miyakawa would wish it. The very notion of the "imagination of matter," indeed the core of Bachelard's reflections on aesthetics, conceives of matter more as the object of this imagination than as its original locus. The genitive "of," one might say, is in this case rather objective than subjective. The "imagination of matter" is therefore still nothing other than the subject's imagination in relation to matter. Similarly, what Bachelard calls the "time of the granite" (as in Miyakawa's quote)<sup>275</sup> does not so much originate in the actual relationship between human labor and the resistance of the rock itself, but rather, in Bachelard's own words, in "the imagination of resistance, the imaginary substantiality of the against."<sup>276</sup> By the same token, the resistance of matter to which he refers is nothing other than "the imagination of the resistance we attribute to things,"<sup>277</sup> and the time of materiality still, to some extent, the subject's inner experience of temporality.

The recourse to Bachelard leaves Miyakawa's conceptualization of the new temporality of matter in *Informel* painting in a rather ambiguous position. His attempt to devise a conception of duration as the defining temporality of contemporary art stumbles once again on the very subjectivism he tried to avoid by distancing himself

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<sup>274</sup> Miyakawa writes: "Time acquires material (*busshitsuteki*) reality through the transformation (*henbō*) of matter (*matière*) and according to matter's unique natural qualities (as Bachelard says, 'there is a time of the granite'). On the other hand, through the gesture caused by its own resistance, the tension of the muscles, matter becomes rhythm and duration ['the gesture of work is synthesized for the human who works by the thing that resists, the very resistance of matter']." Ibid.

<sup>275</sup> Miyakawa does not specify the reference, but this quote is taken from Gaston Bachelard, *La Terre et les Reveries de la Volonté* [*The Earth and the Dreams of Will*] (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1948), p. 22.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

from Bergson. However, isn't this ambiguity an inherent character of *Informel* itself? In other words, isn't the very relationship with materiality in *Informel* painting still inevitably tainted by its implicit subjectivism? Restany's analysis of *Informel* gesturality both in terms of a relationship with matter and as the quintessential mark of a new *lyricism* is a powerful instance of such an ambiguous position.<sup>278</sup> By attempting a decisive interpretation of *Informel* as anti-subjectivist and, so to say, purely materialistic painting, Miyakawa fails to perceive the extent to which *Informel* itself – and not only its generalized interpretation among critics – remains attached to that very modern paradigm which it was supposed to overcome. And this blindness, or Miyakawa's refusal to see the limitations of *Informel* informs, to a great extent, Miyakawa's criticism of the artistic production of the early 1960s and his position vis-à-vis anti-art in the 1963 essay.

### ***Informel* and Anti-Art**

In Miyakawa's 1963 assessment of the art-historical present "after *Informel*," the idea of "anti-art" figures as the result of a misunderstanding of the stakes of contemporary painting and a miscarriage of the fundamental value-change (*kachitenkan*) in the ontology of expression. With *Informel* – he claims – the act of painting – previously conceived as mere expressive means – becomes an end in itself. But although the process of becoming an end in itself (*jikomokuteki-ka*) of the expressive act should have been clear to everyone, Miyakawa observes that the novelty of *Informel* was once again reduced to the context of modern expression, and thereby misunderstood in its fundamental innovative character. "What remained after the bankruptcy [of the *Informel* endeavor]," Miyakawa states, "was anti-art."<sup>279</sup> It is

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<sup>278</sup> Cf. Restany, *Lyrisme et Abstraction* [*Lyricism and Abstraction*], pp.13-19.

<sup>279</sup> Miyakawa, "Anforumeru ikō [After *Informel*]," p. 29.

mainly the concept or label of “anti-art” that Miyakawa dismisses here, as a misguided interpretation of the art of the early sixties. The actual phenomenon behind the label of anti-art, on the other hand, the “recent tendency of so-called *objetification* (*obuje-ka*),” does nothing other than confirm “the paradox according to which the expressive act has become an end in itself and the only engagement of the subject of expression.”<sup>280</sup> From this perspective, rather than a reaction to *Informel* as a “deadlock of abstraction,” Miyakawa identified in the object-based art of the early 1960s a smooth continuity with *Informel* painting, in spite of its failure to recognize its precedents in *Informel*:

[I]f the weakening of *Informel* is taken for a deadlock of abstraction, it seems that also the possibility of the contemporary contained in the process of *objetification* (*obuje-ka*) is at risk of being lost from sight. And, on the one hand, in connection to the tendency of *objetification* taken merely as a reaction to abstraction and a return to reality, anti-art, which is nothing other than a fruit of *Informel*, now grows into an Oedipus position.<sup>281</sup>

In opposition to Restany, who already in 1960 conceptualized New Realism as a major rupture with the lyric abstraction of *Informel*,<sup>282</sup> Miyakawa did not, at this point, regard the change of media – namely, from painting to object-making – as theoretically significant. Just like *han-geijutsu*, Nouveau Réalisme and Neo-dada constituted, in his view, simple misnomers and misperceptions of the new tendencies in contemporary art. What is important is not the “usage of existing objects” (*kisei no obuje*), he argued, not the “new language of anti-art”<sup>283</sup>; what counts is the value-

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>282</sup> Cf. Restany, preface to *Lyrisme et Abstraction* [*Lyricism and Abstraction*]; also Pierre Restany, *Nouveau Réalisme: 1960-1990* [*New Realism: 1960-1990*] (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 2007).

<sup>283</sup> Miyakawa, “Anforumeru ikō [After *Informel*],” p. 30.



change in expression itself. And this change, Miyakawa insisted, had already taken place before anti-art or Nouveau Realisme, namely with *Informel* itself.



Figure 152. Shiomie Miekko (Chieko), *Water Music*, a component of *Fluxkit*, 1964

What Miyakawa fails to account for at this point is the very limit of *Informel* as still being a technique of canvas painting, that is, its incapacity to go beyond an essentially modern form of art. By remaining attached to the canvas, *Informel* could not possibly realize to its full extent what Miyakawa calls the transformation of the expressive act into a goal in itself. The final product of the *Informel* gesture was still, inevitably, the painted canvas. As the critic Ferreira Gullar once observed in relation to Abstract Expressionism, “by conserving the support, they maintained the concept of the work of art.”<sup>284</sup> And this concept, as Miyakawa himself pointed out, belongs inherently to the context of modernity. Gullar sarcastically emphasizes the way in which even Pollock, in spite of all his radical transformation of the process of painting, ultimately did nothing other than canvas painting: “I do that while jumping,

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<sup>284</sup> Ferreira Gullar, Interview. Cocchiarale and Geiger, *Abstracionismo Geométrico e Informal. A Vanguarda Brasileira nos Anos Cinquentas* [Geometric and Informal Abstraction. Brazilian Avant-Garde in the Fifties], p. 100.

dancing, throwing things on top [of the canvas], and so on, but afterwards I take it and put a frame on it.”<sup>285</sup> As Haryū observed in 1956, in contrast to early twentieth century Dada, *Informel* signaled the possibility of an “agreement between the traces (*kiseki*) of action (*kōdō*) and the structure of art.”<sup>286</sup> *Informel* canvases were still commercialized in galleries and exhibited in museums, at a secure distance from the everyday life of spectators – and that was far from a mere collateral caveat in Michel Tapié’s complex commercial scheme. By remaining attached to the (essentially modern) painted canvas, *Informel* fails to fully leap into a new paradigm of artistic expression, and thus – in Miyakawa’s terms – to become genuinely *contemporary*.

By bracketing the notion of “art” and proposing to question the ontology of expression, Miyakawa fails to fully criticize the presupposition of the subjective character of art. Precisely the concept of “expression” – as Miyakawa himself recognizes – is tied to an understanding of self-expression of the subject. While trying to understand *Informel* as a radical transformation of the ontology of expression itself, he still remains attached to the very notion of expression, which he tries to reformulate as an expression of matter and gesture. However, because he retains the term “expression,” Miyakawa is unable to overcome its implicit reference to a subjective act. Only by entirely abandoning the notion of expression can one really think of art beyond the subjective expression of internal contents. Miyakawa’s analysis theoretically conducts *Informel* to its very limits, and thereby reveals the extent to which it remains attached to the paradigm of subjectivity that it purportedly attempts to subvert.

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid., p. 100-101.

<sup>286</sup> Haryū Ichirō, “Busshitsu to ningen [Matter and Man]” in *Mizue* (January 1957), p. 47.

### **Anti-Art’s “descent to the everyday”**

As early as 1964, one can notice a significant change in Miyakawa’s assessment of the phenomenon of anti-art. In the article “Anti-art: Its descent to the everyday,” published in the aftermath of the debate organized by critic Tōno Yoshiaki and the Minami Gallery, “Anti-art: Yes or No?” (*Han-geijitsu, ze ka hi ka?*)<sup>287</sup>, Miyakawa endeavors a careful examination of the stakes of anti-art, in which he implicitly revises his perspective on its theoretical and art-historical implications. The very notion of a “descent to the everyday” in the article’s title emphasizes a crucial aspect of those practices that clearly differentiates them from *Informel* even in Miyakawa’s generous interpretation of it.

In anti-art’s usage of everyday objects as opposed to the traditional painted canvas or pedestal sculpture, Miyakawa discerns far-reaching consequences for the very mode of being and the status of art in society. So called “anti-art” practices abandon the elevated and detached realm of the modern artwork and descend to the level of everyday life. By doing so, anti-art blurs the limits between the realm of art and its outside: “The descent to the everyday is nothing other than the final annihilation of the border between art and non-art. Art can be anything and anything can become art.”<sup>288</sup> Nonetheless, by annihilating the border, anti-art does not entirely eliminate the distinction between art and non-art. Art does not simply dissolve in the realm of everyday life. On the contrary, as Miyakawa points out, a deeper – albeit less obvious and less secure – distinction between art and non-art comes into being. In this

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<sup>287</sup> Tōno Yoshiaki was credited with introducing the term “anti-art” (*han-geijutsu*) for the first time in the context of Japanese art-criticism in a 1960 article published in the *Yomiuri Newspaper*. Cf. Tōno Yoshiaki, “Garakuta no han-geijutsu [Junk Anti-Art],” *Yomiuri Shinbun*, evening edition (2 March 1960); cf. Tomii, “Geijutsu on their minds. Memorable Words on Anti-Art,” p. 40.

<sup>288</sup> Miyakawa, “Han-geijutsu: sono nichijō-sei e no kakō [Anti-Art: Its descent to the everyday],” p. 96.

sense, while anti-art marks “the decisive exchange between art and non-art, it is also the increasingly sharp rupture between art and non-art. Because even though art can be anything and anything can become art, it is not the case that art is everything and everything is art.”<sup>289</sup> It is not by chance that the tracing of this boundary becomes, since that time onwards, a major concern for art itself, and a large part of the artistic production becomes explicitly reflective on its own identity as art. When Akasegawa Genpei states that “nothing is more conscious of art than anti-art,”<sup>290</sup> at stake is precisely this need to conceptually establish art’s identity after anti-art’s annihilation of the concrete limits of the realm of art.



Figure 153. Hi Red Center, *Cleaning Event*, Tokyo, 1964

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Akasegawa Genpei, “Poketto ni haburashi wo [A Toothbrush in my Pocket]” in *Obuje wo motta musansha [An Objet-carrying Proletarian]*, pp. 50-57.

In a 1965 article entitled “After Anti-Art,”<sup>291</sup> Miyakawa provides what constitutes perhaps the clearest explanation of the fundamental meaning of his claim about anti-art’s “descent to the everyday.” What anti-art achieves by bringing art down from its privileged and detached position into the realm of the everyday is an “absolute violation” of the sacred character of art. According to Miyakawa, the whole history of modern art, with its medieval, religious legacies, is empowered by a repeated staging of a “de-sacralization” of art, followed by its recurrent “re-sacralization.” This sacred character is what protects, but simultaneously conceals and falsifies the existence of art. By descending to the realm of the everyday, art is stripped bare of its last veil of sacredness, and exposed as what it is in reality. However, because art’s own existence (*jitsuzai*) was permanently guaranteed by the sacredness that concealed an ultimately empty essence, when exposed in broad day light, art can only show itself as a fundamental “absence” (*fuzai*). Miyakawa’s formulation is worth reproducing in full:

If we can say that art at some point discarded God and abused beauty, what made this violation possible was the very sacralization of art (from religious art to art as religion). Moreover, the sacralization of art can only be maintained and promoted by the continual dialectics of the violation of the sacred itself. One might be able to say that art is the remaining trace of an old ritual – the staged violation of the sacred and its ensuing reaffirmation. However, through the whole span of modern art, what was able to increasingly raise the tension of this dialectics was no longer a staged violence. Rather, it was the growing desire to abuse the prohibition itself in order to catch a glimpse of the real face of art. It was this desire that finally reduced painting to a pure act, and, beyond that, redirected such an act toward everyday objects (*nichijōteki-na obuje*). This is nothing other than the absolute violation of the sacred or, so-to-say, the lifting of its last veil. But what was the function of this veil? Perhaps, art only exists (*jitsuzai suru*) as concealed (*kakusare*) and falsified (*itsuwararete*) – by God, by beauty, or by anything else – in other words, as alienated (*sogai sarete*). And according to the different manifestations of this alienation the art of each era could exist. However, when art itself is exposed under broad

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<sup>291</sup> Miyakawa Atsushi, “Han-geijutsu ikō [After Anti-Art]” in *Miyakawa Atsushi chosakushū* [Selected Writings by Miyakawa Atsushi], vol. 2, pp. 117-120.

daylight, it cannot be anything other than absence (*fuzai*). This is the real meaning of what I call the descent to the everyday as the experience of the art of today.<sup>292</sup>

It is remarkable that Miyakawa relates his conception of the concealment and falsification of art through God or beauty to the notion of “alienation” (*sogai*). He, whose formulation of the materiality of painting tacitly displaces the question from any possible proximity to a Marxian conception of materialism, seems to reintroduce at this point a clue to the possible analogy between the development of modern art (through its recurrent crises of desecralization and resacralization) and the development of capitalism itself. Miyakawa does not pursue the connection any further. But it is precisely this encounter of the false, veiled character of art and the empty essence of money as the absolute commodity form that would be the basis of one of the most important events of 1960s “anti-art” in Japan. In Akasegawa Genpei’s *1.000 Yen Note Trial* – which was already taking place by the time of Miyakawa’s writing – art’s inherent falsehood and emptiness clashes with the fundamentally fictional essence of paper money itself.

Granted that the concern with materiality repeatedly demonstrated in *Informel* painting can be said to have prepared, to some extent, the path for three-dimensional, object- and performance-based art in the 1960s, *Informel* itself was unable to confront the challenges of art outside the frame. As Ferreira Gullar states in 1960:

Artists of such tendencies still make use – even if desperately – of the conventional supports of those artistic genres. ...instead of rupturing the frame so that the work can flow into the world, they keep the frame, the canvas, the conventional space, and put the world (raw materials) inside it. They presuppose that what is inside a frame is a picture, a work of art. It is true that

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

by doing so they denounce the end of this convention, but without announcing a path to the future.<sup>293</sup>

Meanwhile, this path was being announced by a young generation of artists who allowed the materiality of painting to flow outside the limits of the frame and transposed painting from the metaphorical space of the canvas to what was perceived as the “real space” of life.

In contrast to Miyakawa’s claim in the earlier essay, *han-geijutsu*’s new language and its usage of ready-made objects – as well as its departure from the museum space into the streets – emerges here as an important theoretical and art-historical move beyond *Informel*. As sharply illustrated in a cartoon by Akasegawa Genpei,<sup>294</sup> the so-called *Informel* Typhoon that hit the Japanese art-world in the mid 1950s was still a storm inside a glass of water, that is, inside the safe and limited space of the canvas and, by extension, of the museum and the art establishment. It is thus rather in the so-called anti-art of the early 1960s, that one can recognize a decisive rupture with the inherited structures of modern art with which *Informel* remained comfortably complicit.

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<sup>293</sup> Ferreira Gullar, “Teoria do não-objeto [Theory of the Non-object]” in *Jornal do Brasil* (21 Nov. 1960); reprinted in *Projeto construtivo brasileiro na arte: 1950-1962* [*Brazilian Constructive Project in the Arts: 1950-1962*], p. 90. English translation published in *Experiência Neoconcreta: momento-limite da arte* [*Neoconcrete Experience: limit-moment of art*] (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2007), pp. 142-50.

<sup>294</sup> Cf. Yoshida Yoshie, “Anforumeru no arashi [The Informel Storm]” in *Kaitaigeki no maki-orite. 60 nen-dai zen’ei bijutsu-shi* (Tokyo: Zokei-sha, 1982), p. 71.





Figure 154. Akasegawa Genpei, illustration for Yoshida Yoshie’s “Anforumeru no arashi” (Informel Storm) (A: “Aha, is this another storm of falling flowers?” B: “No, it’s the Informel Storm!” C: “Actually, this is a glass.”)

Anti-art’s “descent to the everyday” can be said to complete the paradigm shift of contemporary art discerned by Miyakawa in the “dialectics of gesture and materiality” of *Informel* painting. By breaking away from the safe environment of the canvas into the realm of everyday life, the artistic practices of the early 1960s performed and exposed this dialectics of gesture and materiality – no longer as a step toward the production of the artwork, as in *Informel*, but *as the work itself*. But the transformations in the very mode of being of art inaugurated by this paradigm shift were far more radical than what Miyakawa could envisage from the perspective of



*Informel* painting. In order to be consistently contemporary, it was necessary for art to abdicate its own secure position and distinct identity as art.

## CHAPTER 5

### ART OUTSIDE THE FRAME

I made *Trepante* in 1964, of rubber; it was the last *Bicho* I made. ... I took it to Mário [Pedrosa]'s place and threw it on the floor. Mário kicked *Trepante* and said: 'Finally one can kick a work of art!'<sup>295</sup>



Figure 155. Lygia Clark, *Trepante (Climber)*, 1964

When Mário Pedrosa returned from Tokyo to Rio de Janeiro in 1959, significant events had taken place, which profoundly transformed the local art scene.

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<sup>295</sup> Lygia Clark, Interview. Cocchiarella and Geiger, *Abstracionismo geométrico e informal: A vanguarda brasileira nos anos 50*, p. 150.

Among the young artists for whom Pedrosa never ceased to play the role of a theoretical instigator, Ferreira Gullar recalls, “there was a certain apprehension concerning how he would perceive that, because we knew that the advances contradicted his formulations.”<sup>296</sup> Indeed, the basic proposals of the “Neoconcrete Manifesto,” published by Ferreira Gullar in the newspaper *Jornal do Brasil* during Pedrosa’s stay in Japan, and to an even greater extent Gullar’s “theory of the non-object,” deeply contradicted Pedrosa’s conceptualization of a revolution of sensibility through aesthetic contemplation of artistic forms. The Neoconcrete appeal to the radical elimination of contemplative distance in favor of spectator participation in the work of art clearly undermined Pedrosa’s theorization of the possibility of a revolutionary aesthetics of abstract painting.

Nevertheless, in face of the radical proposals of the nascent Neoconcrete movement, it did not take long for Pedrosa to embrace the new promise of an immediate relationship between art and society, no longer mediated by the aesthetic apparatus. Pedrosa discerned in Lygia Clark’s *Bichos* the “perfect expression of thinking dilacerated between art and non-art”<sup>297</sup> and famously embraced Hélio Oiticica’s *Bolides* and *Parangolés* as an “experimental exercise of freedom.” In a comparable fashion to Miyakawa’s formulation of the paradigm of *gendai*, Pedrosa discerned in the emerging stage of artistic practice of the early 1960s a radical rupture with the modern era; he described it as the beginning of “post-modern art” in which Brazilian artists played an unprecedented historical role:

We find ourselves now in a different cycle, which is no longer artistic, but cultural, radically different from the previous one, initiated, let’s say, with Pop

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<sup>296</sup> Ferreira Gullar, Interview. Cocchiarella and Geiger, *Abstracionismo geométrico e informal: A vanguarda brasileira nos anos 50*, p. 99.

<sup>297</sup> Mário Pedrosa, “A obra de Lygia Clark [The Work of Lygia Clark]” in *Acadêmicos e Modernos: Textos Escolhidos III [Academics and Moderns: Selected Texts III]*, p. 351.

Art. I would call this new cycle, with its anti-art vocation, “post-modern art.” (In passing, let me say here that, this time, Brazil participates no longer as a modest follower, but as a precursor...).<sup>298</sup>

This chapter explores the transition from painting into three-dimensional space and the conceptualization of spectator participation within the Neoconcrete movement; it examines a crucial span in the parallel and interrelated creative trajectories of Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica and Ferreira Gullar roughly situated between 1954 and 1964. Within the 1960s avant-gardes, the “objectification” of art was simultaneously a process of intense questioning of objectivity itself and of the status of the art object; beyond the limited, fictional space of canvas painting, Neoconcretism ruptured the boundaries between artistic creation and the “real world.” This chapter discusses the potential and challenges of the Neoconcrete attempt to create “art outside the frame” and analyzes its radical critical stance in relation to the modern aesthetic tradition.

Ferreira Gullar once remarked that the Rio de Janeiro-based Neoconcrete movement, which had its first exhibition in 1959, “took the step forward that the European constructive avant-garde avoided to take.”<sup>299</sup> This fact, he claimed, “is what defines its radicalism and, at the same time, its significance in the history of contemporary art.”<sup>300</sup> According to Gullar, such a decisive step was first taken by Lygia Clark, “the moment in which, standing before that blank panel, she decided to act upon it instead of painting it.”<sup>301</sup> He refers thereby to Clark’s 1959 series of works entitled *Casulos* (Cocoons), in which the metallic pictorial surface folds onto itself, thus transposing the geometry of Concrete painting to three-dimensional space. In

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<sup>298</sup> Mário Pedrosa, “Arte Ambiental, Arte Pós-Moderna, Hélio Oiticica [Environmental Art, Postmodern Art, Hélio Oiticica]” in *Acadêmicos e Modernos: Textos Escolhidos III* [*Academics and Moderns: Selected Texts III*], p. 355.

<sup>299</sup> Ferreira Gullar, *Experiência neoconcreta: momento limite da arte* [*Neoconcrete Experience: Limit-Moment of Art*], p. 21.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Lygia's act of folding the flat surface – and thereby revealing its actual existence in space – Gullar perceives a transition from painting into *real action*: “Lygia chose action over a return to painting by cutting the surface and then stuffing it (*Casulos*), thus abandoning pictorial meta-action – metaphorical by definition – in favor of real action upon painting's material support: the surface.”<sup>302</sup>

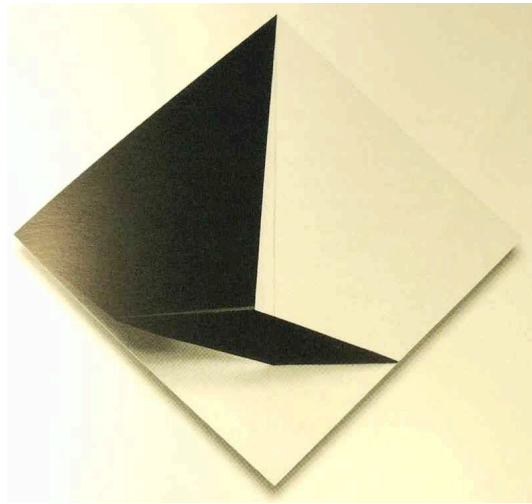


Figure 156. Lygia Clark, *Casulo (Cocoon)*, 1959

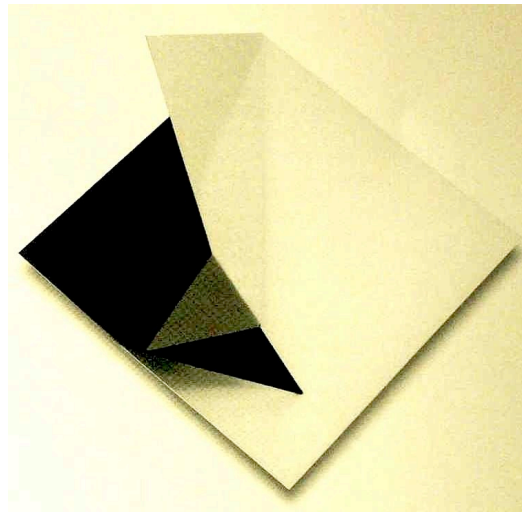


Figure 157. Lygia Clark *Casulo (Cocoon)*, 1959

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

Gullar attributed the precedence of the Neoconcrete group vis-à-vis their counterparts in the centers of cultural production in Europe and North America to the important changes in the global dynamics of cultural exchange that took place in the aftermath of World War II. A major shift in the transnational balance of power and cultural hegemony after WWII provided the conditions for artists in a peripheral country like Brazil to pursue their experiments independently from the newest trends and tendencies that arrived from abroad. In other words, it created the circumstances for the emergence of an authentically *avant-garde* formation in the periphery, the conditions to overcome the very paradox postulated in *Avant-Garde and Underdevelopment*:

With the war and all the confusion that happened, with the displacement of the center of cultural power from Paris to New York, we went deeper in the most radical line of questioning of contemporary art; we reached an impasse, and consequently, we exploded. We exploded before the others. We exploded the flat surface, time, the support; we anticipated spectator participation in art, the Penetrable, body art. We were the first to lay it all out.<sup>303</sup>

Gullar's account of the chronologic precedence of Brazilian artists in a number of experiments that would define the fate of global contemporary art in the postwar might be disputed. Yet, precise chronologies notwithstanding, it is noteworthy that such experiments were in fact burgeoning contemporaneously in a number of urban centers in different regions of the world around the turn of the 1960s. And while at times creative borrowing and even straightforward copying can be observed between artists in different locales, in many instances such notions as borrowing and influence are clearly insufficient to account for the surprising simultaneity of artistic experiments and innovations in different parts of the world.

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<sup>303</sup> Ferreira Gullar, Interview. Cocchiarella and Geiger, *Abstracionismo geométrico e informal: A vanguarda brasileira nos anos 50*, p. 100.

In certain cases, it is possible to identify parallel developments, seemingly resulting from autonomous and disconnected processes taking place in different locales. What Gullar describes as the explosion of the Neoconcrete movement, its step forward in the history of contemporary art, bears more than a coincidental similarity with the anti-art and Neo-Dada experiments discussed by Miyakawa in terms of anti-art's "descent to the everyday." Inserted in antagonistic artistic traditions, the Rio-based Neoconcrete movement and the Tokyo Neo-Dadaists simultaneously moved beyond canvas painting into object-based art. Their radical artistic practices and theories defy the basic presuppositions about the status of the work of art, its insertion in society and political potential. By "breaking" the canvas frame, and thereby breaking away from painting itself, it was also the institutional frame of art, its secure, limited and fictional space that those young artists attempted to overcome in view of a more immediate relationship to society as a whole.

### **Breach of the Frame**

In a text written for the catalogue of the New Brazilian Objectivity exhibition, held 1967 in Rio de Janeiro, Hélio Oiticica points out among Brazilian artists in the 1960s a number of different "passages towards the object."<sup>304</sup> Indeed, by 1967, the transition from canvas painting into three-dimensional, "real" space could be observed in the recent work of numerous artists not only in Rio, but also in Tokyo, New York, Los Angeles, Paris and elsewhere. *Arts Magazine* published in March 1967 a highly influential issue entitled "A Minimal Future?,"<sup>305</sup> addressing Minimalism and the rise of object-based art in the United States throughout the 1960s. 1967 was also the year

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<sup>304</sup> Hélio Oiticica, "Esquema geral da nova objetividade [General Scheme of the New Objectivity]" in *Aspiro ao Grande Labirinto*, p. 87.

<sup>305</sup> *Arts Magazine*, March 1967. Cf. *A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958-1968*, exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004).

in which Italian critic Germano Celant introduced the term *Arte Povera*, to describe the practices of an interconnected group of artists centered on Milan, Turin and Rome, whose works attempted to bring art back to the realm of objects and materiality.<sup>306</sup>

Within the Neoconcrete group, whose transition towards object-based art predated the advent of both Minimal and *Arte Povera*, the parallel trajectories of Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica from canvas painting into object-based constructive propositions deserve particular attention. The course of their artistic experiments, permeated by intense direct exchanges and the strong sense of communal theoretical questioning that characterized Neoconcretism, complement each other in remarkable ways. Few artists experienced the transition towards the object in such a visceral manner and with such degree of theoretical and art-historical consciousness.

In the course of Clark's work, the origins of the movement that led from the flat pictorial surface of canvas painting into three-dimensional space can be traced back as early as the 1954 *Compositions*. Through a subtle but deeply consequential move, Clark incorporates the canvas frame into the space of painting, and thereby takes over the buffer zone that separated the fictional space of the canvas from so-called "real space" outside. The frame that previously secured the distinction between an inside and outside of the pictorial space becomes part of the painted totality; Clark's *Compositions* take thus a first step in a theoretical-material questioning of the structure of canvas painting itself. This questioning, which discretely determines her works since the mid-1950s, was destined to bring about the destruction of painting itself as an independent medium.

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<sup>306</sup> Cf. Germano Celant, *Arte Povera [Art Povera]* (Milano: Electa, 1985).



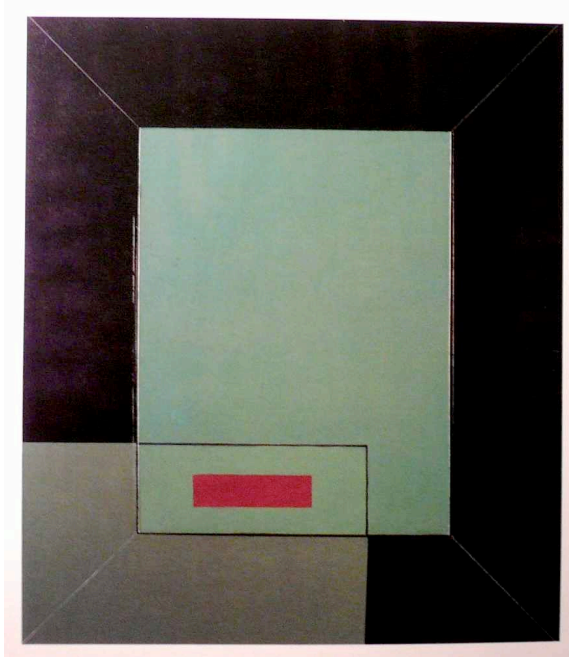


Figure 158. Lygia Clark, *Composição no. 5. Série: Quebra da Modura* (Composition no. 5. Series: Breach of the Frame), 1954

In an 1958 essay entitled “Lygia Clark: A Radical Experience,”<sup>307</sup> Ferreira Gullar discerned in Clark’s inquiry into the diverse modes of relationship between the painted canvas and its frame the identification of “the core of pictorial language with the material, simple and irreducible core of the canvas: the surface.”<sup>308</sup> Recognizing the flat surface as the structural core of painting, Clark focused on its intrinsic material limits given in the traditional formal structure of painting itself, namely, the division between the painted surface and its surrounding frame. According to Gullar, instead of accepting the painted canvas as the “legitimate field for the birth of the work,” Clark chooses to “clean up from it its ‘cultural’ layers,”<sup>309</sup> thus exposing its material source of expression. Examined from the perspective of the further development of her work,

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<sup>307</sup> Ferreira Gullar, “Lygia Clark: uma experiência radical” in *Experiência neoconcreta: momento limite da arte*, pp. 80-7.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

Lygia's incorporation of the frame appears as the first step in a subversive relationship to the medium of painting, which would lead to the necessary dismantling of the flat pictorial space. Gullar observes:

While attempting to incorporate the frame into the canvas in 1954, [Lygia] ignored, perhaps, that this would lead her to the destruction of the pictorial space and, later, to the rediscovery of a space which does no longer remain separate from the world, but, on the contrary, borders immediately on it, thus penetrating the world and letting itself be penetrated by it.<sup>310</sup>

The incorporation of the frame into the space of painting awakened Clark's attention to the thin line that visually separates the canvas and its surrounding wooden frame. When dividing two surfaces of different colors, that is, when the frame was painted in a different color than the inside surface, Clark recalls, the line would become almost imperceptible; on the other hand, when both sides were painted the same color, the same line became an important visual element in the painting's structure. Enthused by her discovery of what she came to refer as the "organic line," Lygia observes its affinity with the lines that separate walls, ceiling and floor of a room. At this point, in parallel to the *Compositions*, she engages in the production of models of housing interiors, in which the "organic line" figures as a crucial structural component. Years later, in interview with Fernando Cocchiarale and Anna Bella Geiger, Clark comments about the developments of her work in that period:

I had already started to approach the question of form when I discovered that line which I called the organic line. In the end, it was nothing but a line between two surfaces. But the artist is crazy. I saw the line, was enchanted by it and started to think that it was some kind of magic, because if I put one color on a side and another contrasting color on the other, the line disappeared. If I put the same color on both sides, it worked. Then the line became the module for all constructions I made. Before that, came the breach of the frame. In 1954, I started to make works in which the canvas was very small and the frame was huge, and in the canvas there was a formal connection to the frame.

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

The frame was part of the composition. After this line came precisely the junction of canvas and frame. That's when I started to develop wooden surfaces that I called frames."<sup>311</sup>

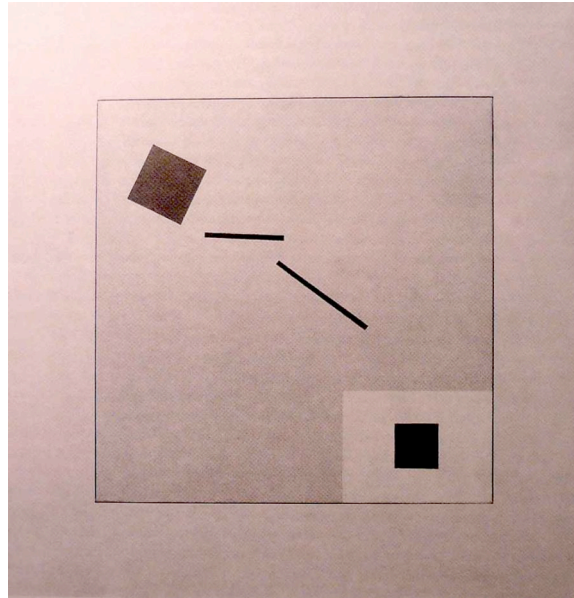


Figure 159. Lygia Clark, *Descoberta da Linha Orgânica* (*Discovery of the Organic Line*), 1954

A further step in this process can be observed in Clark's mid-to-late 1950s series *Modulated Surfaces* and *Planes on Modulated Surfaces* in which she decisively moves away from the canvas as the primary surface of painting, thus eliminating the clear division between an inside and outside of the work still present to some extent in the *Compositions*. Her *Modulated Surfaces* are made of painted flat pieces of wood assembled together, at times in a rectangular form, still reminiscent of the canvas structure but fundamentally different from it in its structural composition. In those works, the "organic line" is displaced from the border to the core of the work itself, where it divides and connects each of its flat wooden plates.

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<sup>311</sup> Lygia Clark, Interview. Cocchiarella and Geiger, *Abstracionismo geométrico e informal: A vanguarda brasileira nos anos 50*, p. 145.

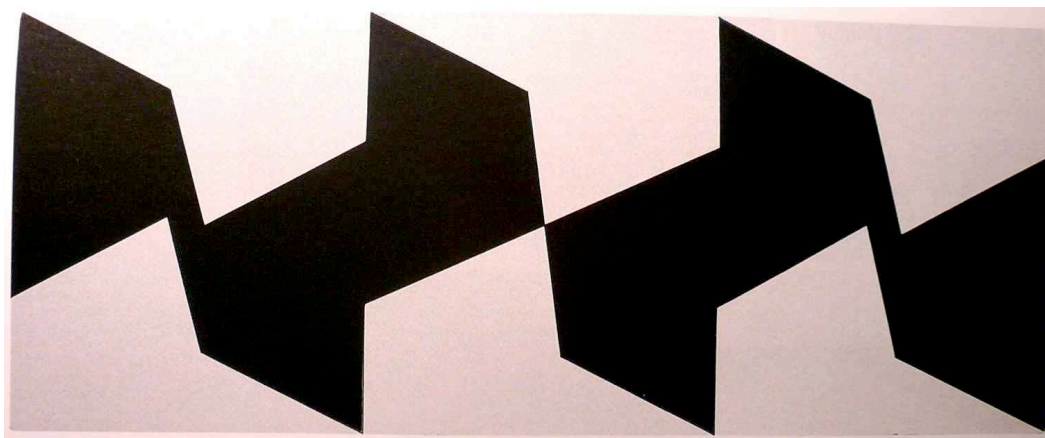


Figure 160. Lygia Clark, *Planos em Superfície Modulada (Planes on Modulated Surface)*, 1957

The same geometric forms and the progression to clearly defined tones emphasizing the prominence of form and line that characterize the later *Modular Surfaces*, can be found in the 1959 *Casulos* (Cocoons). Made of flat pieces of metal, the *Cocoons* fold onto themselves, thus penetrating three-dimensional space without entirely abandoning the flatness of the painted surface. Through the fold, the flat surface itself emerges in its three-dimensional, “real” existence. In this sense, *Casulos* find themselves in the very limit between painting and the object. Their three-dimensionality calls for a more dynamic mode of spectatorship than a flat painting; it requires eyes that can move around with a body and discover the work’s different perspectives. Like actual cocoons, they are still attached to the flat surface of the wall, but contain in themselves the beginning of a different being whose fate is to fully liberate itself from the wall support and win for themselves the open space. This is precisely what happened in Clark’s work in 1960, with the series of works entitled *Bichos* (Beasts).

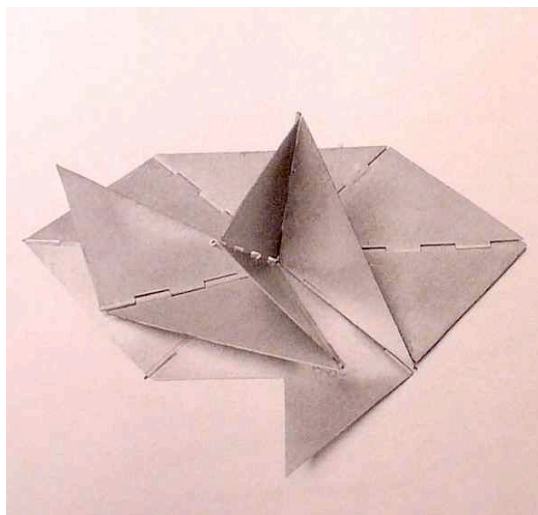


Figure 161. Lygia Clark, *Metamorfose 1 (Metamorphosis I)*, 1960

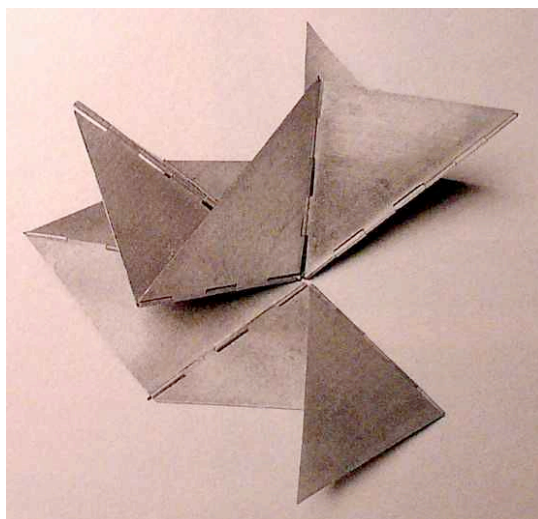


Figure 162. Lygia Clark, *Metamorfose 1 (Metamorphosis I)*, 1960

Composed of flat pieces of unpainted metal connected by an elaborate articulation, *Bicho* can be said to derive, to some extent, from a natural unfolding of the *Casulo*. The moving articulation that connects the different surfaces of metal, carefully engineered by Clark herself, constitutes the backbone of the *Beast*. One can recognize in *Bicho* the same geometric forms and folds that composed the *Cocoons*, now developed around its multiple “backbones,” which connect, articulate and keep it

standing. With *Bicho*, Lygia's work detaches itself from the wall and stands independently in three-dimensional space. Free in space and autonomously articulated, *Bicho* proposes to the spectator a different kind of interaction. If the *Cocoons* already required eyes that were able to move around, abandoning their static contemplative perspective, *Bicho* demands direct intervention, and manipulation of its structure by the viewer. Also for this reason, it seems to obviate the usage of painting and color, previously necessary to guide the detached eyes through the surface of the work. No longer attached to the flat surface of the canvas, Clark's *Beasts* comes to occupy a space in the real world.

The 1963 *Caminhando* (*Walking*) marks a further step in Lygia's experiments with spectator participation. At this point, the work required participatory engagement not just as a perceptive activity of a readily existing object, but rather as a constitutive part of the work itself. While *Bicho* could still be said to exist before the spectator's touch, with *Caminhando* what the artist puts forward is in itself a mere proposition waiting for the intervention of the spectator to be fulfilled and completed. Anna Dezeuze called this type of object, characteristic of the Neoconcrete artists in the early 1960s the "do it yourself artwork."<sup>312</sup> The work as such exists only during the present of its completion by the spectator; in perceiving the work what the spectator perceives is the meaning of his/er own action.

Were it not for the fact that Lygia herself performed and recorded numerous times the cutting of the Möbius Strip required from the participant spectator, *Caminhando* could be described as an "instruction piece," like a number of Yoko Ono's works of the same period, for instance. In a 1983 text, Clark reflects on the

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<sup>312</sup> Cf. Anna Dezeuze, *The "Do-it-yourself Artwork": Spectator Participation and the "Dematerialization" of the Art Object, New York and Rio de Janeiro, 1958-1967*. Ph.D. Dissertation (Courtauld Institute of Art, 2003).

historical significance of *Caminhando* in relation to the traditional structure of the work of art:

When the work was given complete (“the work of art”), all the spectator needed to do was to decipher it, and for that sometimes many generations were necessary. It was the problem of an elite. From now on, with *Caminhando*, it is in the instant in which one realizes (pratica) the act that the spectator simultaneously perceives the meaning of his/er own action. It is a more direct communication. It is no longer an elite problem.<sup>313</sup>



Figure. 163. Lygia Clark, *Caminhando (Walking)*, 1963

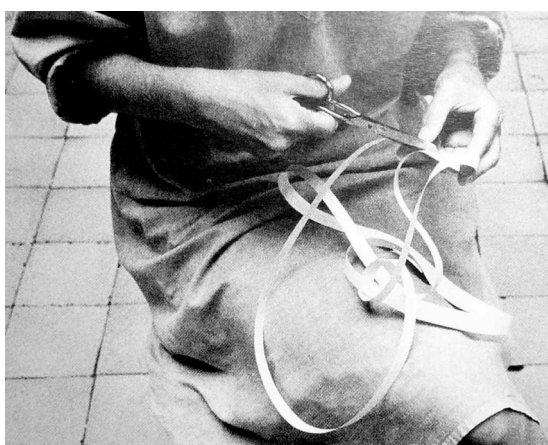


Figure 164. Lygia Clark, *Caminhando (Walking)*, 1963

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<sup>313</sup> Lygia Clark, “A Propósito da Magia do Objeto [Concerning the Magic of the Object]” in *Lygia Clark*, exhibition catalogue (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1997), p. 153.



Since the mid 1960s, the question of spectator participation and multi-sensorial relationship to the work of art acquires increasingly radical contours in Clark's experiments and theorizations. Her works delve further and further into the problem of a tactile relationship between the subject of perception and the outside world and in the tactile possibilities of intersubjective contact. The art object becomes an invitation and medium of contact between two or more participants, and the spectator acts as both the subject and object of perception within the totality of the work. Such works that functioned as mediatory entities, as propositions and facilitators of a sensorial relationship between the I and the world, constitute what Clark described a few years later with the paradigmatic title "relational objects."



Figure 165. Lygia Clark, *Diálogo: Óculos* (*Dialogue: Glasses*), 1968

Clark's conceptualization of the relational object advances some of the crucial challenges to the framework of traditional aesthetics, which determined the basic traits of what came to be termed "contemporary art" as structurally differentiated from modern art. Not only in Brazil, but also in Europe, most notably in France, where she



spent some of the decisive years of her artistic trajectory, Lygia's experiments with relationality played a central role in the development of the conceptual framework of contemporary art. In a historical appraisal of the emergence of contemporary art in France, Catherine Millet comments on the abolition of "the respectful distance separating the spectator from the traditional painting" in the works of the advocates of "polysensorial art" and underlines the role of Lygia Clark:

Just as painters such as Jackson Pollock had put everything they had, both psychologically and physically, into the making of the work, so viewers/actors were to respond to the work with their entire instinctual being. The main proponent of this tendency, the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark, created fabric or plastic body works into which one or two people could enter and gain a heightened sense of their body(ies).<sup>314</sup>



Figure 166. Lygia Clark, *Máscaras Abismo* (*Abyss Masks*), 1968

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<sup>314</sup> Catherine Millet, *Art Contemporain en France* [*Contemporary Art in France*] (Paris: Flammarion, 1987), p. 44.

Considering Clark's relevance and the exposure of her work within the Parisian art world of the 1960s and 70s, Nicolas Bourriaud's blatant omission of any reference to her works and concepts in his later formulation of a "relational aesthetics" is rather startling.<sup>315</sup> Lygia's "relational objects" anticipate, in fact, some of the main traits of Bourriaud's aesthetics. It is worth noticing, on the other hand, that precisely the construction of an aesthetic theory on the basis of relationality as attempted by Bourriaud contradicts some of the fundamental insights of Lygia's experimental trajectory. To some extent, Lygia's experiments with relationality brought her to a radical critique of aesthetics and ultimately to abandon the frame of art itself. The breach of the frame and the abolition of contemplative distance ultimately led her to the disintegration of art itself as a separate domain of experience. The path that started with the 1954 Compositions and took increasingly radical shapes throughout the 1960s and 70s led Lygia to abandon the frame of art and take her experiments with relationality to the realm of psychological treatment. Whether the abandonment of art consists in an inherent necessity of the critique of contemplation or can be explained away as an idiosyncrasy of Clark's creative remains to be decided.

### **From the Metaphysics of Color to Spectator Participation**

Seventeen years younger than Clark, Hélio Oiticica joined Grupo Frente in 1955, at the age of eighteen. His early works, still strongly indebted to the legacy of Concretism, come to reveal a growing spark of subversion vis-à-vis the Concretist attempt to reduce art to strictly scientific principles. Against the utopia of purging artistic production from any trace of subjective intervention, thereby converting it into

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<sup>315</sup> Cf. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*.

a “means of conceptually deducible knowledge,”<sup>316</sup> Oiticica’s intuitive use of geometry and color seem to hint, from early on, at the impossibility of entirely eliminating subjectivity from painting.

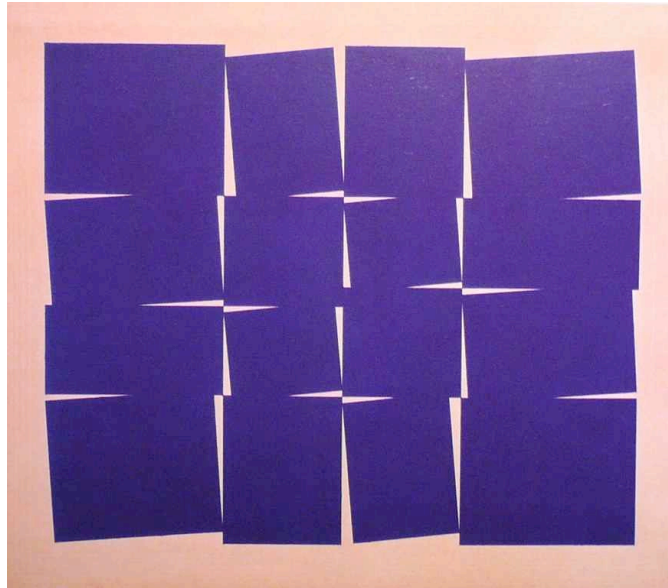


Figure 167. Hélio Oiticica, *Metaesquema (Metascheme)*, 1958

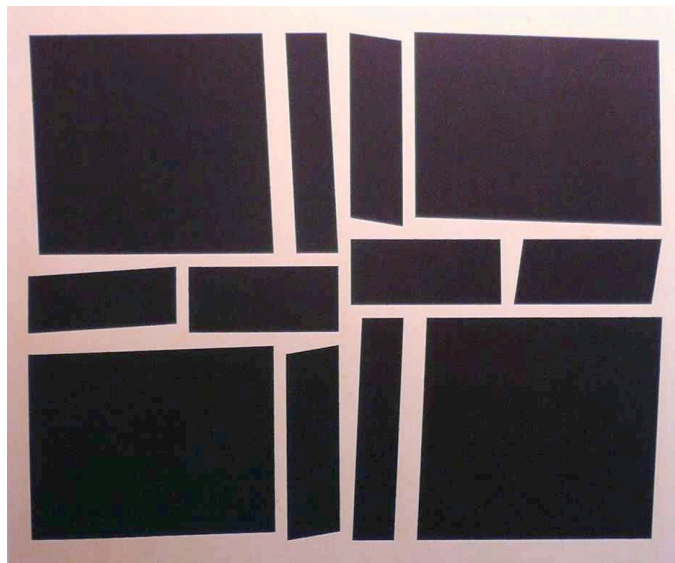


Figure 168. Hélio Oiticica, *Metaesquema (Metascheme)*, 1958

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<sup>316</sup> Cf. Waldemar Cordeiro, et al. “Manifesto Ruptura [Rupture Manifesto]” in *Projeto construtivo brasileiro na arte: 1950-1962*, p. 69.

Oiticica's critical stance towards the Concretist orthodoxy, recognizable at least as early as the 1958 *Metaschemes (Metaesquemas)*, explodes with the 1959 *Bilaterals, Monochromatics* and *Inventions*, which mark the beginning of his artistic transition into three-dimensional space. Similarly to Lygia's *Modulated Surfaces*, Hélio's first experiences with monochrome painting display a heightened consciousness of the flat surface's existence in three-dimensional space, without abandoning the flat support of painting. The *Inventions*, consisting of square pieces of flat wood painted in one sole color attached about one inch from the wall, are particularly effective in demonstrating flatness as an essentially three-dimensional attribute. Writing in 1962, Oiticica recalls the significance of those works in the course of his creative trajectory: "My whole transition from the canvas to space began in 1959. I had by then attained the use of few colors, mainly white, with two differentiated tones, or even works in which I used one sole color, painted in one or two directions."<sup>317</sup> As Gullar accurately puts it, if Clark can be said to find in the flat surface the "core of pictorial language," it is mainly in a radical experience of color that Oiticica encounters such an ultimate ground; once that experience had been attained, the canvas itself as the support of painting appears to him as superfluous and even obtrusive. Oiticica writes:

The arrival at a single color, at pure space, at the core of the canvas led me to three-dimensional space itself, here already with the discovery of the meaning of time. I no longer want the *support of the canvas*, an a priori field where the "act of painting" takes place, but that the very structure of this act take place in space and time. This is not only a change of media, but in the very conception of painting as such; it is a radical position in relation to the perception of the canvas, in relation to the contemplative attitude that motivates it, towards a

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<sup>317</sup> Hélio Oiticica, "A transição da cor do quadro para o espaço e o sentido de construtividade [The Transition of Color from the Painting into Space and the Meaning of Construction]" in *Habitat* (March 1962); reprinted in *Aspiro ao grande labirinto*, p. 50; english translation in *Hélio Oiticica. The Body of Color*, exhibition catalogue. Mari Carmen Ramírez, ed. (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), p. 222.

perception of color-structure in space and time, much more active and complete in its enveloping sense.<sup>318</sup>



Figure 169. Hélio Oiticica, *Invenção no.4* (*Invention no.4*), 1959-62

The question of “metaphysical color” and its intrinsic relationship to a mode of temporality occupy Oiticica’s intense theoretical reflections around 1960. “I have been obsessively concerned with the problem of color and the meaning of color-time. I feel the need for a revision of the main problems of color in the artistic development of contemporary painting,”<sup>319</sup> he wrote in a journal entry dated June 1960. Departing from the utopian objectivity of Concretism, he discovers in the experience of color the irreducibility of an internal subjective element in painting – and in the philosophy of Henry Bergson the elements to link the internal experience of color to the subject’s inner sense of time as *duration*.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Oiticica, “The Transition of Color from the Painting into Space and the Meaning of Construction” in *Hélio Oiticica. The Body of Color*, p. 222.

<sup>319</sup> Oiticica, “Junho 1960 [June 1960]” in *Aspiro ao grande labirinto*, p. 19.

<sup>320</sup> Mari Carmen Ramírez’s examination of the problematic of color in the works and writings of Hélio Oiticica contributed important elements for the appreciation of the relevance of Bergson’s notion of *durée* within Oiticica’s reflections on color and

Oiticica identifies in representational painting the same mechanical conception of time that constitutes the object of Bergson's critique in *Duration and Simultaneity*, and discerns in the Bergsonian concept of duration the hint at a different dimension of temporality beyond mechanical time. Oiticica writes:

In representational painting the sense of space was contemplative, and that of time mechanical. Space was what was represented on the canvas, fictitious space, and the canvas functioned as a window, a field for the representation of real space. Time, then, was simply mechanical: the time from one figure to another or from that figure's relationship to perspectival space; finally, it was the time of figures in a three-dimensional space, which became two-dimensional on the canvas.<sup>321</sup>

This kind of mechanical conception of time and color did not go unchallenged throughout the history of painting, as Oiticica recognizes in the works of painters such as Robert Delaunay, and most explicitly in Mondrian and Malevitch.<sup>322</sup> Concretism, on the other hand – in spite of its ostensibly non-representational stance – constituted a step back in concerning the problem of time in painting:

The Concretists still conceptualize time mechanically and, in a way, as Ferreira Gullar so nicely puts it, take a step backward in this regard. Their concept of space is an analytical conceptualization of that space's intelligence, which does not attain a temporal vitality, because it still contains residues of representation.<sup>323</sup>

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temporality. Cf. Mari Carmen Ramírez, "The Embodiment of Color – 'From the Inside Out'" in *Hélio Oiticica. The Body of Color*, pp. 27-73.

<sup>321</sup> Oiticica, "Color, Time, and Structure (1960)" in *Hélio Oiticica. The Body of Color*, p. 206.

<sup>322</sup> Cf. Hélio Oiticica Archive: Doc. n. 0182, pp.10-14.

<sup>323</sup> Oiticica, "Color, Time, and Structure," p. 206.

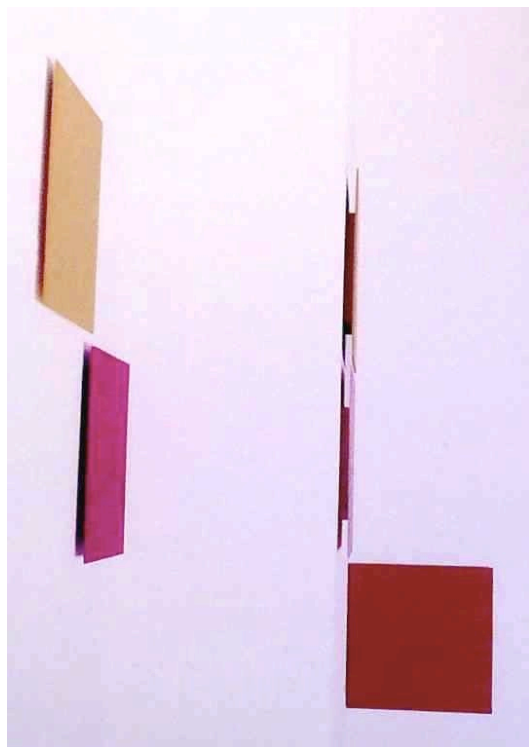


Figure 170. Hélio Oiticica, *Invenções (Inventions)*, 1959-61

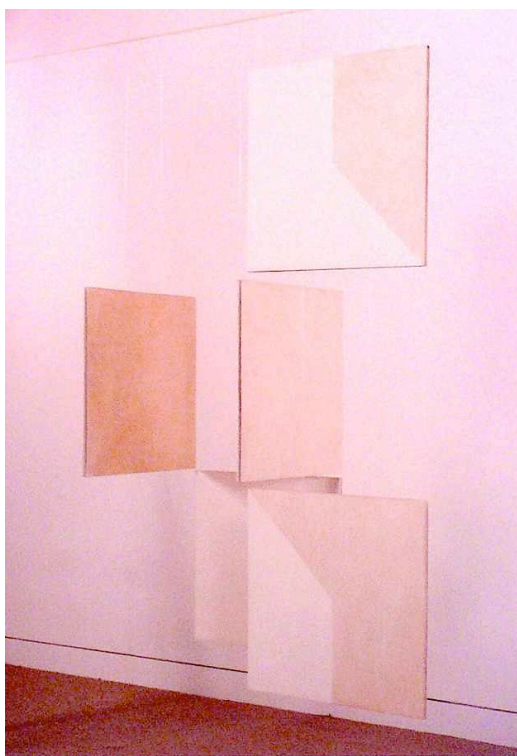


Figure 171. Hélio Oiticica, *Bilateral Equali (Bilateral Equali)*, 1959

In a similar fashion to Miyakawa, Oiticica finds in the idea of duration a powerful tool to conceptualize time beyond its modern, mechanical understanding. In opposition to the homogenous, universal time of the objective world, he brings in the Bergsonian conception of the subject's inner experience of temporality as *durée*, whose subjectivist character did not seem to concern him as much as it troubled Miyakawa in relation to *Informel*. One might conjecture that against the background of the dominant Concretist ideology of late 1950s Brazil subjectivism in art did not appear as an imminent threat. As cogently stated by the critic Ronaldo Brito, "in the realm of a movement committed to the constructive reading of post-cubist art, to go as far as to introduce Bergson – with his intuitionist doctrine and his idea of time as duration – was almost a scandal."<sup>324</sup> Aware of the scandalous nature of what Miyakawa might have deemed an "untimely return to Bergsonism," Hélio pushes for a subjective conception of color and time at the precise moment in which the Brazilian constructive project seemed to reach its peak.

It is worth noticing that the Neoconcrete introduction of a subjectively inflected temporality in art poses a challenge not only to the scientifically oriented conception of the artwork inherent to Concretism, but also to its general understanding of the development of world history, and the history of art within it. In Bergsonian terms, Concretism can be said to understand time mechanically, that is, implicitly in relation to movement in space. As Bergson notes, the common notion of a mechanical "unfolding of time (*déroulement du temps*)" has been socially established in reference to the movement of rotation of the earth, which constitutes the basis of chronological

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<sup>324</sup> Ronaldo Brito, *Neoconcretismo: Pico e Ruptura do Projeto Construtivo Brasileiro* [*Neoconcretism: Peak and Rupture of the Brazilian Constructive Project*], p. 69. Ramírez refers to this same passage in "The Embodiment of Color – 'From the Inside Out'," p. 43.



time as we deal with it in the everyday.<sup>325</sup> São Paulo Concretists depended upon universal mechanical time not only in regard to their conception of artistic production, but also as far as their visions of society at large, development, industrialization, and the role of art within those processes, were concerned. Concretism embodied, in the aesthetic realm, the ideal of development and industrialization that pervaded Brazilian political imagination throughout the 1950s. By introducing the subjective experience of duration as a more fundamental sense of temporality than the one implicit in mechanical time, Neoconcretism introduced a critical element in the core of the Concretist developmental utopia. This constituted a challenge to the universality and linear unfolding of time. Temporality could no longer be simply understood in relation to an objectively determined referent outside the subject, but should be recognized as fundamentally dependent upon a singular experience of duration within the subject itself.<sup>326</sup> Under such circumstances, artistic experimentation could no longer rely upon the course of a scientifically determined development, but had to proceed instead through fundamentally singular, intuitive paths. The radicality of Neoconcretism in the early 1960s, its “step forward” beyond the European constructive avant-gardes, to use Gullar’s expression, must be understood in relation to this fundamental transformation in its conception of temporality.

In Oiticica’s visual works and writings of the early 1960s, such a critical maneuver takes place through the enigmatic concept of *color-time*. Not less than Miyakawa, Oiticica conceived of the subjective experience of duration as intrinsically related to the outside of the subject. In this sense, he appropriates the Bergsonian

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<sup>325</sup> Henri Bergson, *Durée et Simultanéité* [*Duration and Simultaneity*], p. 50.

<sup>326</sup> Pamela Lee points out a similar critique of chronological time in North American Minimal art in the 1960s; she describes the fundamental temporality of Minimal Art in relation to the concept of “duration,” but understands it in terms of the Braudelian “*longue durée*” rather than through Bergson. Cf. Lee, *Chronophobia. On Time in the Art of the 1960s*.

*durée* not in view of a romantic affirmation of subjectivity (as Miyakawa feared in relation to *Informel*) but aiming rather at a different relationship between the subject and the outside world, which would ultimately blur the subject-object dichotomy itself. The experience of color-time constitutes the center of this process; it connects the subject's internal sense of temporality to external space. "Metaphysical color (color-time) is essentially active from the inside out, it is temporal *par excellence*."<sup>327</sup> Intuitively experienced by the subject, metaphysical color can no longer be objectified as something merely exterior, "out there." It must become the element of a total, enveloping experience through which the subject *lives* in color – which is precisely what happens in the development of Oiticica's works in the years that follow.

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<sup>327</sup> Oiticica, "December 1959" in *Hélio Oiticica. The Body of Color*, p. 190. Bergson himself had already suggested the connection between duration and the perception of color. In *The Creative Mind*, he compares the concretion of duration to the vibrations in light, and its dispersion to materiality. Cf. Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*. Trans. Mabelle Andison (Westport: Greenwood Publishers, 1968), pp. 220-221. It is not clear whether Oiticica was familiar with such passages. However his usage of the term "metaphysical" in relation to color does seem to follow Bergson's understanding of metaphysics as intuitive cognition of the object.



Figure 172. Hélio Oiticica, *Grande Núcleo* (*Large Nucleus*), 1961

Oiticica's experimentations with color in the early 1960s can be said to follow a twofold path. Its first layer, leading to what he terms the "dilution of color in environmental space," can be observed as early as 1960 in the first *Nuclei* (*Núcleos*) and *Penetrables* (*Penetráveis*). The *Nuclei* are composed of multiple flat square pieces of wood, painted generally in a single color, hanging on transparent lines from a structure attached to the ceiling; their composition lead the spectator to immersion in an environment of strong tones of yellow or red that seem to float free in space in a geometric disposition that changes according to the spectator's position as well as to the effects of light and air currents. Oiticica remarks about the *Nuclei*: "Everything that was previously background, support for the act and the structure of painting is

transformed into a living element; color wants to manifest itself wholly and absolutely in this almost diaphanous structure.”<sup>328</sup>

Also from 1960 date the models for the first *Penetrables*, which further Oiticica’s persistent attempt to transform the relationship to color from objective contemplation into a total enveloping experience. “In the Penetrable, decidedly, the relationship between the spectator and the color-structure takes place in complete integration, since the spectator is virtually placed in the center of this structure.”<sup>329</sup> The *Penetrable* constitutes, thus, the culmination of the environmental system initiated with the *Nucleus*. In the *Penetrable*, Oiticica states, “the analytic dissection of color achieves an initial synthesis: the dilution of color in environmental space seeking concentration within a ‘total system’.”<sup>330</sup>

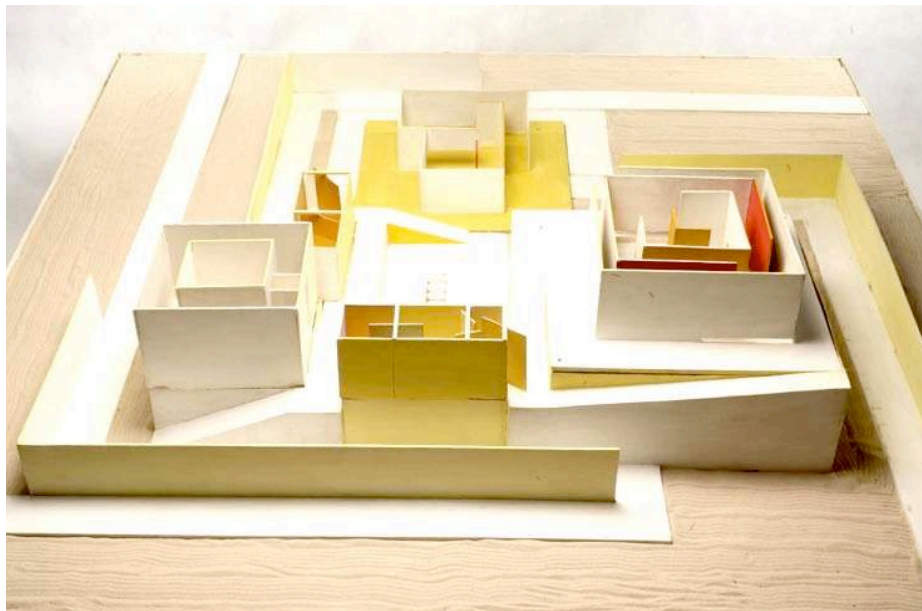


Figure 173. Hélio Oiticica, Maquete para *Projeto Cães de Caça* (Maquette for *Hunting Dogs Project*), 1961

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<sup>328</sup> Oiticica, “The Transition of Color from the Painting into Space and the Meaning of Construction,” p. 222.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>330</sup> Oiticica, “May 11, 1964” in *Hélio Oiticica. The Body of Color*, p. 263.

In parallel to the experiments that brought color to an environmental level in the *Nuclei* and *Penetrables*, Oiticica pursues the course of an “embodiment” of color in three-dimensional objects. When color “is no longer subjugated to the rectangle, nor to any representation of this rectangle,” he writes, “it tends to ‘embody’ itself; it becomes temporal, it creates its own structure, and the work then becomes the ‘body of color’.”<sup>331</sup> The 1960 *Spatial Reliefs*, composed of flat, geometrically shaped pieces of wood attached together in three-dimensional structures, can be regarded as a first step in this direction.

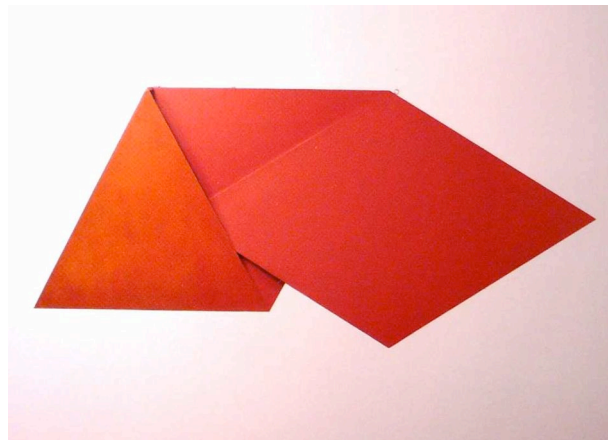


Figure 174. Hélio Oiticica, *Relevo Espacial [vermelho]* (*Spatial Relief [red]*), 1960

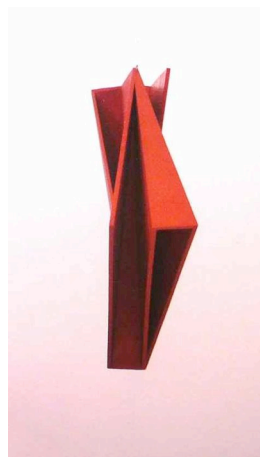


Figure 175. Hélio Oiticica, *Relevo Espacial [vermelho]* (*Spatial Relief [red]*), 1960

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<sup>331</sup> Oiticica, “September 19, 1963” in *Hélio Oiticica. The Body of Color*, p. 262.

More than any of Oiticica's works, the *Bolides* (1963-67) epitomize this radical embodiment of color in the object. In a journal entry of October 1963, he notes: "In truth, the necessity to give color a new structure, to give it 'body', led me to the most unexpected consequences, such as the development of the opaque and transparent *Bolides*, in which color presents itself not only in the oil technique and in glue, but in its pigment state, contained in the *Bolide* structure itself."<sup>332</sup> Borrowed from the vocabulary of astronomy and geology, where it designates a fireball or unidentified body that hits the earth with great impact, the title "bólide" is itself inseparable from the concrete presence of the variously shaped, lively colored objects created by Oiticica between 1963 and 1967. The blocks and boxes of color that constitute the *Bolides*, Oiticica explains, "are masses that express this chromatic whole... what one seeks here is to structure color entirely around its primordial expressive ability."<sup>333</sup> If the *Penetrables* and *Nuclei* enacted the dilution of color in its environmental state, the *Bolide* enables its maximum *objective* concentration. But the resulting "object" can no longer be viewed as an art "object" in the conventional sense, not objectively; it demands a differentiated, active mode of engagement by the viewer-subject. Far from a return to objectivity in its traditional sense, the "objectification" – or, in Oiticica's terms, the *embodiment* – of color in the *Bolides* demands a radical transformation of the status of the art object, and of objectivity itself.

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<sup>332</sup> Hélio Oiticica, "Bólides" in *Aspiro ao grande labirinto*, p. 63.

<sup>333</sup> Oiticica, "May 11, 1964," p. 263.



Figure 176. Hélio Oiticica, *B 08 Bólido Vidro 02 (B 08 Glass Bolide 02)*, 1963-4

Composed of a wide variety of materials such as wooden boxes, transparent glass containers, sand, fabric, scrap metal, and pigments of different sorts, the *Bolide* “incorporates the object into an aesthetic idea.”<sup>334</sup> The original object becomes “a part of the genesis of the work, thus acquiring a transcendental character”<sup>335</sup> For Oiticica, such a transformation of the everyday object into a work of art did not consist in some kind of “lyrification,” neither was it just a matter of detaching the object from its everyday usage without interfering in its material constitution, as in Duchamp’s ready-mades, for instance. At stake was the act of “stripping existing objects of their connotative qualities in order to leave them in their primitive purity.”<sup>336</sup> Differently from the Surrealist “found object,” the objects appropriated into the *Bolide* structure were not encountered by chance, but rather carefully chosen to fit a previously

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<sup>334</sup> Oiticica, “Bólidos,” p. 63.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.

<sup>336</sup> Oiticica, “September 19, 1963,” p. 262.



conceived idea of the work. “Nothing more unfortunate could be said [about the process of creation of the Bolides] than the word ‘chance’,” argues Oiticica, “as if I had ‘found by chance’ an object, the container, and then created a work; no! The obstinate search for ‘that’ object indicated already the *a priori* identification of an idea and an objective form.”<sup>337</sup> Nonetheless, his obstinate control of the *Bolide*’s productive process had in view a radically open experience of the object, liberated from any previous conditioning. Oiticica notes:

In the *Bolides* experience especially, I feel like a child who begins to experiment with objects in order to understand their qualities (solidity, hollowness, roundness, weight, and transparency). . . . Existing connotations, with regard to previously known forms, no longer function independently of an additional new vision, assigning the old substantiation to a level of assimilation of the object’s new [lived] experience.<sup>338</sup>



Figure 177. Hélio Oiticica manipulates *B 11 Bólide Caixa* (*B 11 Box Bolide*), Rio de Janeiro, 1964

<sup>337</sup> Oiticica, “Bólides,” p. 63.

<sup>338</sup> Oiticica, “September 19, 1963,” p. 262.



In a similar fashion to Lygia Clark's *Bichos*, the *Bolides* demand from the spectator a more intense and complete relationship to the work, beyond mere visual contemplation: in Oiticica's words, a relationship that embraces "different orders of the tactile-sensorial field in opposition to the purely visual."<sup>339</sup> Intrinsic to the *Bolides* was the proposition of a "new perceptive behavior," involving the experience of touching and manipulating the objects simultaneously to the act of seeing. Some of the box-shaped *Bolides* contained shelves that could be opened, thereby revealing different forms and sensations; their compact size, bright colors and textures were themselves an invitation to closer contact and manipulation, constantly emphasized in Oiticica's photographic documentation.

In Oiticica's trajectory, objecthood was itself a passage towards increasingly open and radical forms of non-contemplative relationship to art. Paradoxical as it may sound, for Oiticica as for a large number of artists throughout the 1960s, the transition into object-based art was at the same time a move away from objectivity. While transitioning into the objecthood of everyday things, and thus into our immediately surrounding world, art abandons the objective, framed and detached realm of the canvas. In Oiticica's case, the development of environmental experiences with color in space, parallel to the movement of its objectification, makes such fundamental tendencies all the more explicit. Reflecting on the significance of the object in the course of his creative evolution, Oiticica observes years later:

What would the object be then? A new category, or a new mode of being of the aesthetic proposition? As I see it, while possessing as well these two meanings, the most important proposition of the object, of the object-makers, would be that of a new perceptive behavior, created through an increasingly higher level of spectator participation, leading to the overcoming of the object itself as the end of aesthetic expression. For me, in my evolution, the object was a passage to experiences increasingly committed to the individual behavior of each

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<sup>339</sup> Oiticica, "Esquema geral da nova objetividade," p. 89.

participator. I want to stress that it is not a matter of searching for a “new conditioning” for the participator (*participador*), but rather a *tearing down of all conditioning* in view of the search for individual freedom, through increasingly open propositions, so that each one can find in oneself, through availability, through improvisation, his/her inner freedom, the path towards a creative state – what Mário Pedrosa prophetically defined as the “experimental exercise of freedom.”<sup>340</sup>



Figure 178. Woman wears Oiticica’s *Parangolé*

The first *Parangolés* (1964), constitute a crucial turning point in this trajectory towards increasingly complex modes of spectator participation in the work. It marks the moment in which visuality of the static object shows its limits, and the work starts to require a more complex level of bodily participation. At this point the notion of a contemplative attitude to art becomes highly problematic. The word “parangolé” is taken from a curious slang, practically devoid of meaning, and its usage in relation to his works is compared by Oiticia to Kurt Schwitter’s use of combinations of the word “Merz,” as in *Merzbau*. *Parangolés* are lively colored, objects made of cloth, plastic, sometimes straw and other materials, some of which were meant to be held like banners, others to be worn as capes by the spectator/participator, who would move,

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<sup>340</sup> Hélio Oiticica, “Aparecimento do supra-sensorial na arte Brasileira [Emergence of the Supra-sensorial in Brazilian Art]” in *Aspiro ao grande labirinto*, p. 102.

and eventually dance while dressed with them. Several *Parangolés* contained inscriptions in their inner layers, which would become visible according to the movements of those wearing them. “I embody revolt” (1967), “Of adversity we live” (1966) and “I am possessed” (1966) were some of these inscriptions.



Figure 179. Nildo da Mangueira wears *Parangolé* “Incorpo a Revolta” (*Parangolé* “I Embody Revolt”), 1967

Although in a lesser degree, the *Bolides* were already open to participation of the spectator, who was invited to handle the boxes and glass containers that composed those works. But, with the *Parangolé*, the spectator’s experience acquires a deeper, more complete level of participation. Oiticica remarks:

Participation, which from the beginning was opposed to pure transcendental contemplation, manifests itself in many ways. There are, however, two well-defined modes of participation: one is that which involves ‘manipulation’ or ‘sensorial-corporal participation’; the other, that which involves a ‘semantic’

participation. These two modes of participation seek a fundamental, total, significant, non-fractioned participation, involving the two processes.”<sup>341</sup>

This total participation, in its turn, needed to explode the limits of aesthetics. In Oiticica’s words, “It is not the role of the artist to deal with modifications in the field of aesthetics, as if it was a second nature, an object in itself.”<sup>342</sup> Instead, the artist is called to directly “participate in general in the events and problems of the world, consequently influencing and modifying them.”<sup>343</sup> In its “total mode,” participation is no longer the description of a relationship between the spectator and the work, but calls for a direct relationship between art and life, no longer mediated by the aesthetic apparatus. Spectator participation is the outright rejection of the aesthetic mechanisms of a politics of abstraction. As Ferreira Gullar remarks years later, the Neoconcrete turn to action and participation marks a shift to an entirely different mode of social insertion of the work of art, an attempt to reintegrate art in society:

When Neoconcrete art demands participation from the spectator in order for the work to realize itself, this was actually a need to reintegrate art in the social realm, that is, in the relationship with others. The experience was taken to such a level of distance in respect to reality of the objective world that it returns to this reality from the opposite side. Then, an art whose significance becomes more and more difficult to apprehend, even by its author, begins to be substituted by action. One searches in action an answer.<sup>344</sup>

Ferreira Gullar was himself one of the main agents of the fundamental transformations the movement brought about. In his conception of the “non-object” Gullar attempted to theoretically formulate the new condition of the artwork within the paradigm of participation. From Merleau-Ponty and the phenomenological tradition he gathered the theoretical tools to fuse Duchamp and Tatlin, Concretism and Surrealism

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<sup>341</sup> Oiticica, “Esquema geral da nova objetividade,” p. 91.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>344</sup> Ferreira Gullar, Interview. Cocchiarale and Geiger, *Abstracionismo geométrico e informal: A vanguarda brasileira nos anos 50*, p. 100.

into the post-utopian utopia of Neoconcrete art. No longer an object for contemplation, but, as Oiticica puts it, “an invitation for creation,” the non-object is Gullar’s response to the need to theorize the status of the artwork under post-aesthetic conditions.

### **Ferreira Gullar and the non-object**

Published in November 1960 in the literary supplement of *Jornal do Brasil*, Ferreira Gullar’s “Theory of the Non-object”<sup>345</sup> attempts to present a solution to the dilemmas of object-based art since Duchamp and Surrealism. Gullar claims to have first formulated the idea of “non-object” as an attempt to conceptualize a work produced by Lygia Clark in 1958: According to his recollections, “One day, Lygia [Clark] started to dismember a painting, and she made something with pieces of lumber, one on top of the other, some white and others black.”<sup>346</sup> Lygia invited Gullar himself and Mário Pedrosa to see the new piece:

I saw that, and I thought it was cool, different. What is this? [I asked] Because it was not a painting or a sculpture. Then Mário said: it is a relief. But I said, no, not a relief; a relief is something carved on a surface and there is no carved surface there. I thought it was some different kind of object. I was circling around, talking, then I said: “This is a non-object. Mário, come here, I think I discovered a name for that. This is a ‘non-object’.” And Mário answered: “No, that is a meaningless word, because anything I perceive is an object, and the non-object would be something one cannot perceive, so it would be outside knowledge.” I told him I was not interested in knowing what its philosophical concept was, that it did not fit in the classifications we knew. And for the first time the word non-object was pronounced. That remained in my mind, and I felt that it revealed some aspects of other things that were already being made: the book with Hélio, Amilcar [de Castro]’s sculptures, etc. I thought the experience had taken a step forward and started to reveal a new aspect. Because, until that moment, there was no Neoconcrete movement, no

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<sup>345</sup> Ferreira Gullar, “Teoria do não-objeto [Theory of the Non-object]” in *Jornal do Brasil* (21 Nov. 1960); reprinted in *Projeto construtivo brasileiro na arte: 1950-1962*, pp. 85-94.

<sup>346</sup> Ferreira Gullar, Interview. Cocchiarale and Geiger, *Abstracionismo geométrico e informal: A vanguarda brasileira nos anos 50*, p. 99.

Neoconcrete Manifesto. It was since then that we started to see that there was something different going on.<sup>347</sup>

Responding to the objection that “a non-object would be something one cannot perceive,” Gullar explained that the expression “non-object” does not refer to “a negative object or anything that is the opposite to material objects, with properties that are entirely contrary to those of such objects.”<sup>348</sup> An “object,” he argues, is a material thing “as it is given to us, naturally, connected to its designations and everyday usage: the rubber, the pencil, a pear, shoes, etc.,” it is thus “exhausted within its references of usage and meaning.”<sup>349</sup> By contrast, the non-object is disburdened of such references, because it “is not inserted in the condition of the useful and in verbal designation.”<sup>350</sup> The non-object is thus an object stripped of its name, and of its place in the “cultural order of the world.”<sup>351</sup>

However, it is not sufficient to displace an object from a referential context, thus depriving it of name and function, in order to constitute it as a non-object. Simply deprived of a name, the object becomes impenetrable and opaque, “inapproachable and unbearably exterior to the subject.”<sup>352</sup> An object can only be subjectively apprehended through the “connotations its name and usage establish between the object and the world of the subject.”<sup>353</sup> The object is fundamentally a “hybrid-being, composed by name and thing.”<sup>354</sup> The non-object, on the contrary, does not require a name or a place in the scheme of signification of the subject’s world in order to be apprehended. It is “unique, integral and frank,”<sup>355</sup> its relationship to the subject is

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<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

<sup>348</sup> Ferreira Gullar, “Teoria do não-objeto [Theory of the Non-object],” p. 85.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., p. 90

<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

immediate. How to produce such an “integral and frank,” transparent entity, which can be perceived beyond a totality of references, is the core question that Gullar attempts to address.

Gullar found in the phenomenological tradition the basic conceptual tools for his critique of the traditional status of the work of art. The non-object, he argues, “is transparent to phenomenological knowledge; integrally perceptible, [it] gives itself to perception without leaving any residue.”<sup>356</sup> The non-object consists in an object whose position and function in the context of everyday life (what Gullar calls the “cultural order of the world”) has been suspended. This realm of our surrounding environment in the everyday is what Husserl calls “the world of the natural attitude (*die Welt der natürlichen Einstellung*).”<sup>357</sup> The temporary suspension of such a natural attitude (or, more precisely, a suspension of judgment) in relation to a given object (*Gegenstand*) encountered within the world is what constitutes the method of the “phenomenological bracketing (*phänomenologische Einklammerung*).”<sup>358</sup> In this sense, the construction of a non-object implies a process analogous to phenomenological bracketing: the suspension of our “natural,” everyday perception of a certain object in view of its “integral perception” as what it is beyond its position in the “cultural order of the world.”

The widespread appeal of phenomenological theories among postwar avant-garde artists and critics was partly due to Merleau-Ponty’s sharp conceptualizations of our perceptive relationship with the world in terms of its physical, material constituency. The *Phenomenology of Perception* provided a conceptual framework to engage the possibilities of immediate relationship to things beyond the Kantian model

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<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

<sup>357</sup> Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, pp. 48-50.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

of contemplation and the theoretical keys to subvert the subject-object relationship itself through the work of art. For Gullar, as for Oiticica and Clark, the questioning of perception was from early on a way of breaking the primacy of detached vision and theorize the immediate tactile possibilities of our relationship to the work of art. This unusual appeal to the touch in the experimental art of the early 1960s did not fail to attract the attention of the mainstream media and became, for many, one of the most clearly distinguishing marks of Neoconcrete art.



Figure 180. Fortuna, Comic strip announcing the II Neoconcrete Exhibition in Rio de Janeiro, 1960 [Shields in the two middle frames read: “Prohibited to touch the objects” (left); “Please touch the ‘non-objects’”(right)]

On the other hand, Gullar’s understanding of the opposition between the “object” and the “non-object” bears some fundamental affinities with Heidegger’s concept of the “useful thing” or “tool (*Zeug*)” in *Being and Time*.<sup>359</sup> Heidegger writes that “The structure of being of what is at hand as useful things is determined by references,”<sup>360</sup> and defines the “worldliness of the world” as the totality of the referential context in which “useful things” exist as such.<sup>361</sup> The referential context

<sup>359</sup> Cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 68.

<sup>360</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 74.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.



reveals itself to us through the structure of significance (*Bedeutsamkeit*), which in turn constitutes the ontological condition of possibility of *words* and *language*.<sup>362</sup> In these terms, the non-object would hence consist in a “useful thing” dislocated from its place in the structure of significance, and thus deprived of its very name and usefulness. The similarities are all the more significant when one considers that precisely this suspension of usefulness and displacement from the totality of significance is crucial for Heidegger’s later definition of the “thing” (*Ding*) and for his own understanding of the mode of being of the work of art.<sup>363</sup>

If Miyakawa’s proposal in “After *Informel*” consisted in the phenomenological bracketing of “art” in view of a thorough investigation of the meaning of its “reality” as expression, what Gullar describes under the notion of the non-object is the bracketing of the object itself, beyond the (rather modern) presupposition of its existence as the expression of something. It can be said that Gullar substitutes, to some extent, phenomenological bracketing for the Surrealist *depaysement*. In doing so, his theory of the non-object simultaneously reveals a fundamental affinity between phenomenological questioning of objectivity and the Surrealist understanding of the object.

With the non-object, Gullar launches a direct attack on the notion of artistic representation and its remnants within purportedly non-representational art. Once again referring to an essentially phenomenological framework, he argues that the non-object “*is not a representation but a presentation.*”<sup>364</sup> Gullar borrows from Husserl’s distinction between *Gegenwärtigung* (presentation) and *Vergegenwärtigung*

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<sup>362</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>363</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” in *Basic Writings: from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), pp. 139-212.

<sup>364</sup> Non-object, p. 91; emphasis in the original.

(representation),<sup>365</sup> and conceptualizes the non-object as an immediately present entity, which does not refer to anything outside itself. He contextualizes the problem within the history of painting and its development into three-dimensional art, thereby emphasizing the radicality of the Neoconcrete movement, and the concept of non-object as its theoretical core.

Gullar reveals the inherent complicity between the principles of *representation* and *abstraction* and thereby asserts an essential continuity between figurative and abstract painting. The difference between figurative and abstract painting, he writes, “is a difference of degree, not of nature. Non-figurative painting, although realizing itself with a greater degree of abstraction, still remains attached to the problem of representation of the object.”<sup>366</sup> Representational painting is itself already abstract. A painted canvas, as argued the French painter Maurice Denis (1870-1943), “before being a battle horse, a naked woman or some anecdote – is essentially a flat surface covered by colors disposed in a certain manner.”<sup>367</sup> By revealing the fundamentally abstract character of representational painting, Gullar observes, Denis conceptually announces the future of abstract painting before its actual beginning.

In the same way that representational painting already contains an inherent degree of abstraction, insofar as it flattens the represented reality onto the two-dimensional surface of the canvas, the most radical forms of abstract painting remain, as painting, fundamentally representational. Even in Mondrian’s canvases, geometric forms and lines ultimately function as an “extreme allusion” to objects.<sup>368</sup> Insofar as it remains attached to the canvas, and aspires to entirely detach itself from any basis in

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<sup>365</sup> Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, pp. 208-10.

<sup>366</sup> Ferreira Gullar, “Teoria do não-objeto [Theory of the Non-object],” p. 91.

<sup>367</sup> Maurice Denis, quoted by Gullar in Ferreira Gullar; *ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

observed reality, Concrete painting too fails to effectively overcome the scheme of representation. This happens because the very structure of canvas painting engenders a fictional background space, isolated from reality, against which figures are perceived.

Gullar writes:

For being metaphorical, fictional, that space is naturally confined to the limits of the canvas, and even if the frame of such paintings is nothing more than a wooden ruler, its function is still that of a frame. It would also not help to materially take the frame out of such paintings, since its incommunicability with external space is in their very nature.<sup>369</sup>

The non-object, on the other hand, leaves behind the metaphorical space of the canvas and thus radically eliminates the relationship between figure and background.

In this way, it simultaneously rejects representation, abstraction and expression itself.

“The background against which one perceives the non-object,” Gullar claims, “is not the metaphorical background of abstract expression, but real space – the world.”<sup>370</sup>

The non-object does not represent any kind of external reality, it does not point to anything other than itself, and therefore does not contain any degree of abstraction.

Moreover, the non-object does not express any sort of feeling or subjective interiority of the artist as creator.

Gullar presents the non-object as the solution to a long-standing dilemma of artistic creation, which becomes all the more pressing with the advent of object-based art. Essentially a mode of representation, that is, a reproduction of reality within a fictional, metaphorical space, art can be said to constitute itself from the outset as an attempt to overcome this condition of representation and to attain some sort of immediate contact with reality. When Cubism, and early twentieth century Dada in a more radical manner, resort to introducing elements from the “real world” into the

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<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

painted canvas what is at stake is, fundamentally, an attempt to substitute reality – immediate presence – for fiction. The same can be said about Duchamp’s ready-mades, and the Surrealist tradition after him. Gullar writes:

The usage of pasted paper, sand and other elements taken from the real and placed inside the canvas indicates already the necessity to substitute reality for fiction. When later the Dadaist Kurt Schwitters constructs his *Merzbau* – made with objects or fragments of objects found in the street –, it is still the same intention that is amplified, now already liberated from the frame, in real space. At this point, the work of art and the objects seem to blur into each other (*confundir-se*). A sign of the mutual interpenetration between the work of art and the object is the famous *blague* sent by Marcel Duchamp to the Independent Exhibition in New York (1917), a urinal-fountain like those use in the restrooms at bars. This technique of the *ready-made* was adopted by the Surrealists. It consists in revealing the object, by dislocating it from its ordinary function and thus establishing between it and other objects new relationships.<sup>371</sup>

The crucial problem of the ready-made technique lies in its lack of attention to the object’s intrinsic formal qualities, as opposed to its relations of usage and function in the everyday. For Gullar, this is the main reason why such works “are effective only in the first contact, and do not succeed in remaining in the transcendent condition of non-object,” and soon enough “that characteristic obscurity of the *thing* involves again the *work*, recuperating it into the common level.”<sup>372</sup> In Miyakawa’s terms, the ready-made and the Surrealist *objet trouvé* fail to secure their subtle distinction as works of art (or anti-art) in relation to the realm of non-art.

Against the precarious character of the ready-made, in which “artists were beaten by the object,”<sup>373</sup> Gullar prescribes the solid remedy of a constructivist intervention. “The path followed by the Russian avant-garde has shown itself as much deeper,” he states. “The *Counter-reliefs* by Tatlin and Rodchenko, like Malevitch’s

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<sup>371</sup> Ibid., p. 86-7.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

suprematist architectures, indicate a coherent evolution from represented space to real space, from represented forms to *created* forms.”<sup>374</sup> In its thorough formal concern, the constructivist tradition extricated the object from the fictional space of the canvas into three-dimensional space in a tangible, concrete manner, less dependent upon an exclusively verbal, conceptual process, which revealed itself precarious and short-lasting in the ready-made. Therefore, according to Gullar, the constructivist pieces by Tatlin, Rodchenko and Malevitch are the first works in the history of art that deserve to be called “non-objects.” But, of course, they had to wait for his theory in order to be recognized as such; and in this sense the inevitable role of the concept arises once again as a necessity of art outside the frame.

The practical and conceptual experimentation with the possibility of art outside the frame is one of the most important legacies of the 1960s avant-gardes. Described in different instances as a natural, organic development of painting itself, the breach of the frame implied also a decisive attempt to question the socially institutionalized location of art, dislocate it from its role as an object of contemplation and thereby enable its immediate relationship to society as a whole. However, by doing so, it is art’s privileged status that is put at risk – its “aesthetic autonomy,” which according to Jacques Rancière, simultaneously guaranteed a privileged mode of heteronomy – the very condition of possibility of a politics of abstraction.

The Neoconcrete critique of contemplation poses a challenge to the basic notions of aesthetics that determined philosophical discourse on art since the late 18th century. In Kantian terms, it can be said that spectator participation forecloses the possibility of disinterested contemplation, thus undermining the very possibility of a judgment of beauty. The *Critique of Judgment* defines the contemplative attitude of the spectator as a necessary condition for judgments of taste, that is, for judgments on

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

the beauty of natural objects as well as on that of works of art.<sup>375</sup> The aesthetic experience of beauty occupies in this scheme a mediatory position between art and society at large. Human interest in beauty, according to Kant, is entirely dependent on the possibility of sharing its experience with others in society. Participation blurs this clear distinction between artist and spectator, while simultaneously bridging the connection between art and society in a way that obviates the mediation of beauty, and hence of the whole aesthetic apparatus. Contemplation becomes inadequate, and the judgment of taste irrelevant to the work's artistic character.

The Neoconcrete experiments with participation prompted the necessity to rethink the very conception of the artist, in Oiticica's words, "no longer as a creator for contemplation, but as an instigator for creation."<sup>376</sup> Disconnected from the privilege of "genius," creativity is thought since then as a general attribute, whose awakening in the collectivity should be the role of the artist. In its condition of "non-object," the work of art is the material mediator of this process of awakening what Oiticica termed a "general creative will." Rather than the central element of a politics of abstraction, the work of art becomes an invitation for direct participatory intervention by the public in the process of collective creation.

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<sup>375</sup> Cf. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §40 to §48.

<sup>376</sup> Hélio Oiticica, "Position and Program" in *Conceptual Art: a Critical Anthology*, p. 8.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCRETE POETRY AND THE MATERIALIZATION OF LANGUAGE

The presence of verbal discursiveness in the visual arts of the 1960s has frequently been interpreted in terms of Lucy Lippard and John Chandler's notion of a "dematerialization of the art object."<sup>377</sup> The paradigm of signification permeated the practices of New York-based post-minimalist artists such as Joseph Kosuth and Sol Lewitt, who referred to their own works and those of their peers as "conceptual art." Since the late 1960s, notions of conceptual art and conceptualism expanded their explanatory power to the point of including almost any artwork that happened to cross the boundary between visual and verbal discourses. In the 1999 exhibition "Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s – 1980s," the terms conceptualism and dematerialization were rehearsed in relation to works as diverse as Xu Bing's Chinese characters paintings<sup>378</sup> and Akasegawa Genpei's copy of the 1,000 Yen bill,<sup>379</sup> for which precisely the material aspect was indispensable.

Whereas Lippard and Chandler's thesis of dematerialization nicely describes a process that was taking place in the works of "ultra-conceptual" artists such as Lewitt,

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<sup>377</sup> Cf. Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*; also Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art" in *Conceptual Art: a Critical Anthology*, pp. 46-51.

<sup>378</sup> Cf. Gao Minglu, "Conceptual Art with Anticonceptual Attitude: Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong" in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), pp. 127-139.

<sup>379</sup> Cf. Reiko Tomii, "Concerning the Institution of Art: Conceptualism in Japan" in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*, pp. 15-29.

who compared his own art to “signs that convey ideas,” it is unable to account for the wide diversity of ways in which the 1960s avant-gardes crossed and blurred the boundaries between visuality and signification. Lewitt claimed that “When works of art, like words, are signs that convey ideas, they are not things in themselves, but symbols or representatives of things”,<sup>380</sup> in stark contrast to this approach, Ferreira Gullar sought in Concrete poetry “a new perception of language not merely as simple reference to the world of objects, but as a mode of reality of that world.”<sup>381</sup> Conceptual artists’ attempt to distance themselves from materiality and their subsequent move towards a communicational model akin to that of verbal discourse existed in uneasy tension with the opposite tendency to bring written signification closer to its material constitution. When Hélio Oiticica makes use of verbal, “conceptual” elements in his late 1960s works, it is the process of the materialization of verbal discourse, rather than a soft version of the dematerialization of the visual art object that is at work.

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<sup>380</sup> Lippard and Chandler, “The Dematerialization of Art,” p. 49.

<sup>381</sup> Ferreira Gullar, “Poesia Concreta: Experiência Intuitiva [Concrete Poetry: Intuitive Experience]” in *Experiência Neoconcreta: momento limite da arte [Neoconcrete Experience: Limit-Moment of Art]*, p. 151.





Figure 181. Hélio Oiticica, *Mergulho do Corpo* (Dive of the Body), 1967

This chapter examines the legacies of 1950s Concrete poetry in view of its questioning of the complex intricacies between verbal and visual, and throws light on its significance within the context of avant-garde art circa 1960. In 1956, poets Haroldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos and Décio Pignatari expounded their intention to “create a specific linguistic area – *verbivocovisual* – which shares the advantages of nonverbal communication without giving up the word’s virtuality.”<sup>382</sup> Concrete poetry explored the intrinsic material character of verbal language (and languages) and pushed phonetic writing to its limits, thereby disrupting the conventionally established boundaries between the visual and verbal as constituent aspects of a realm of social interaction. The questioning of the materiality of language,

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<sup>382</sup> Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari, “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry” in Haroldo de Campos, *Novas. Selected Writings*, p. 218.

which variants of Concrete poetry in the 1950s inaugurated, remained decisive for a large share of the avant-garde artistic production of the 1960s.

Whereas visual poetry has been particularly influential in Brazil and Japan, it does not follow that its basic principles are only valid within the specific conditions of these two contexts. On the contrary, the present inquiry into the works of a loosely connected group of poets and artists in 1950s Brazil and Japan seeks theoretical insights that can be applied to the general transnational context of the postwar avant-gardes. In fact, the notion of a materialization of the written word in the visual arts can illuminate an often-overlooked aspect of the works of even the fiercest dematerializers. Kosuth's 1967 *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)*, for instance – despite his own ideas about the irrelevance of the material in his works – with its particular attention to form, font and style, which convey the dictionary setting beyond the actual signification of the words, betrays this emergence of the materiality of writing within the medium of painting.

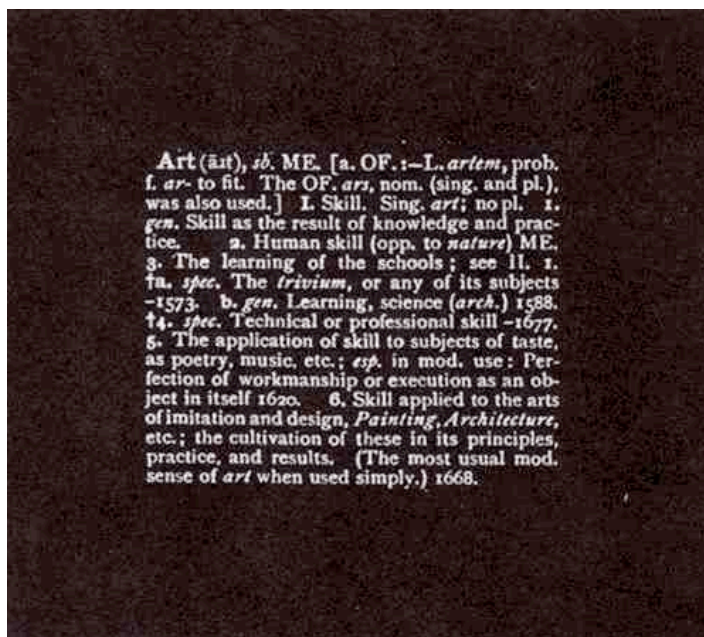


Figure 182. Joseph Kosuth, *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)*, 1967

## Between word and object: Ferreira Gullar and Kitasono Katsue

In the antechamber, the ‘reader/visitor’ will find instructions on how to proceed once inside the poem. The door to the room will open automatically when the reader/visitor approaches. Stepping inside, he will find himself within a room totally dark save for a single spotlight dead centre shining upon a red cube, 40 cm<sup>3</sup>. Lifting this cube he will find a smaller, green cube, 25 cm across. Lifting this, he will find an even smaller white cube, 12 cm<sup>3</sup> and solid (unlike the others, which are open-bottomed). On the underside of this cube, the reader/visitor will see the word *rejuvenesça* (rejuvenate).<sup>383</sup>

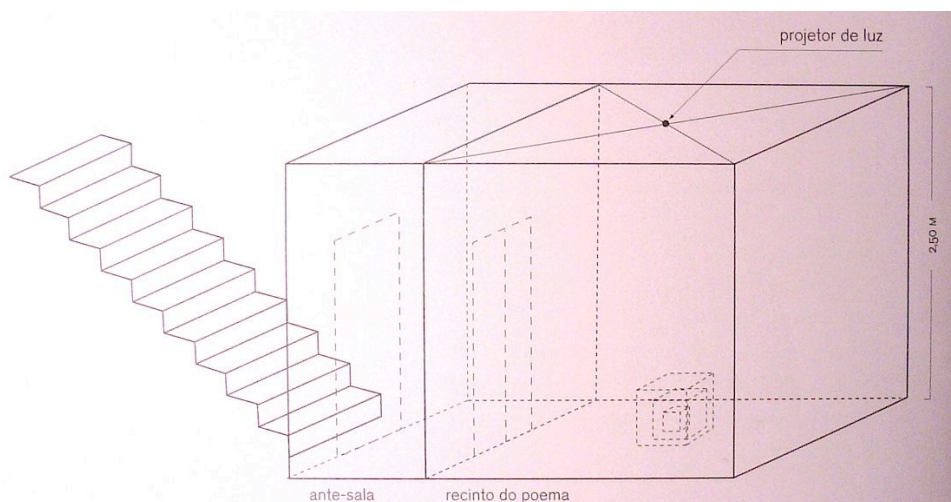


Figure 183. Ferreira Gullar, Project for “Poema enterrado” (Buried Poem), 1959

Is it an installation? A conceptual artwork? An “instruction piece”? In any case, it is certain that if it were not for its title and the author’s self-proclaimed identity as a poet rather than as a visual artist, Ferreira Gullar’s 1959 “Buried Poem” would never be taken for a work of literature. Composed of a single word and a complex material structure, Gullar’s “poem” is closer to the visual or plastic arts than to any literary genre.

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<sup>383</sup> Ferreira Gullar, “Poesia Concreta: Experiência Intuitiva [Concrete Poetry: Intuitive Experience],” p. 151.

Ferreira Gullar's "Buried Poem" stands in the end of a long trajectory of materialization of the written word in (and as) the object of art. In contrast to the process of "dematerialization" perceived by Lucy Lippard in the post-minimalist art of the late 1960s, Gullar's poetic experiments reveal his increasing attention to the materiality of the written word and of the act of reading. According to Gullar, since the actual object of poetry does not preexist poetic praxis, but is, by its very definition, created through poetry, the poem must exist as an object per se. "Concrete poetry," he writes, "is not a 'more efficient' means of approaching the object, because the 'object' does not preexist the poem, but is born with the poem – the object is the poem: the poem approaches the subject (the spectator)."<sup>384</sup> The development of Gullar's poetic experiments in the late 1950s displays the process of becoming-object of the verbal artwork.

In 1956, Gullar created the first "book-poem" (*livro-poema*), consisting of single words printed each on a different page of a white brochure. By turning the odd-sized pages, the reader gradually reveals the poem in its entirety. Through its usage of the space of the page, the book-poem constrains the act of reading into a pronouncedly temporal experience; it reveals reading as a participatory activity, which entails intellectual and bodily praxis rather than mere passive contemplation. The book-poem presents text and its material support as an indivisible unity. It highlights the book's objecthood and exposes the materiality of the written word. Gullar writes:

Thus was born a new book in which the form of the pages was part of the poem, of its visual and semantic structure, and in which progressing page by page was the essential condition for its constitution and materialization as a vehicle of expression. As this poem could only ever be in a book with precisely these characteristics – unlike any other poem, which could just as well be in

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

any book or even on a newspaper page – here word and page constituted an indissoluble unity, hence the designation book-poem.<sup>385</sup>

Made of painted flat pieces of wood and folding articulations, Gullar’s late 1950s “spatial poems” take the experiment of the book-poem a step further. While still reminiscent of the book form because of its articulated folding structure, the spatial poems resort through color and form to more complex geometric compositions than his previous works. The spatial poems contained, for the most part, a single word, which was hidden underneath the wooden structure and awaiting for the reader to unveil it. In opposition to the inherent closure of what is called an “object” of “thing,” Gullar conceived the spatial poems as what he termed “non-objects,” which he defined as something “entirely open to phenomenological perception.”<sup>386</sup> More than objects for contemplation, the poems were meant to be perceived through active, both physical and intellectual interaction.

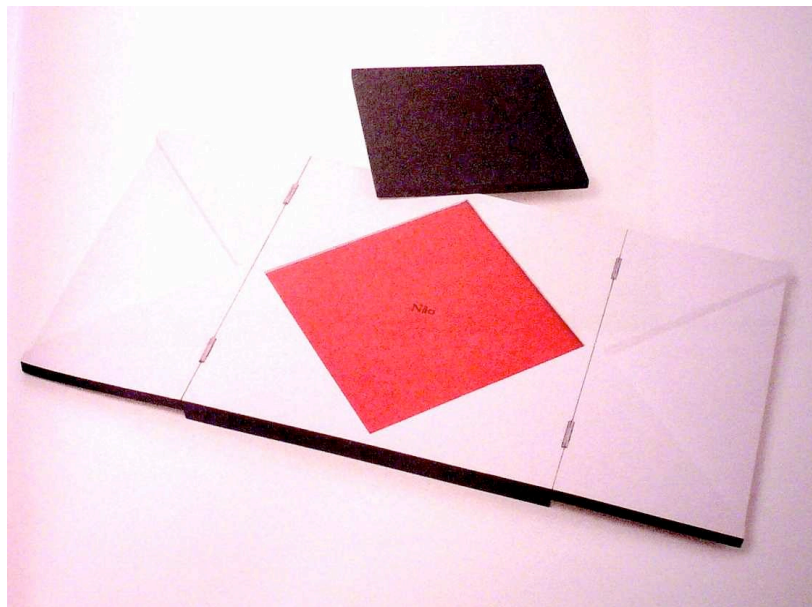


Figure 184. Ferreira Gullar, “Não” (No), *Spatial Poem*, 1958

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<sup>385</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>386</sup> Ferreira Gullar, “Teoria do não-objeto [Theory of the Non-object],” pp. 85-94.



Gullar’s trajectory from word to object – from the early graphic experiments of the 1954 *A Luta Corporal*<sup>387</sup> all the way to the “book-poem” and the “spatial poems” – is by no means an isolated phenomenon in the realm of twentieth-century art. At least since Stéphane Mallarmé’s 1897 “*Un coup de dés*,” visual poetry occupied a defining position in the panorama of avant-garde art. In the mid 1960s, the Japanese poet Kitasono Katsue, who had been experimenting with the visuality of language since the late 1920s, composed his first “plastic poems.”

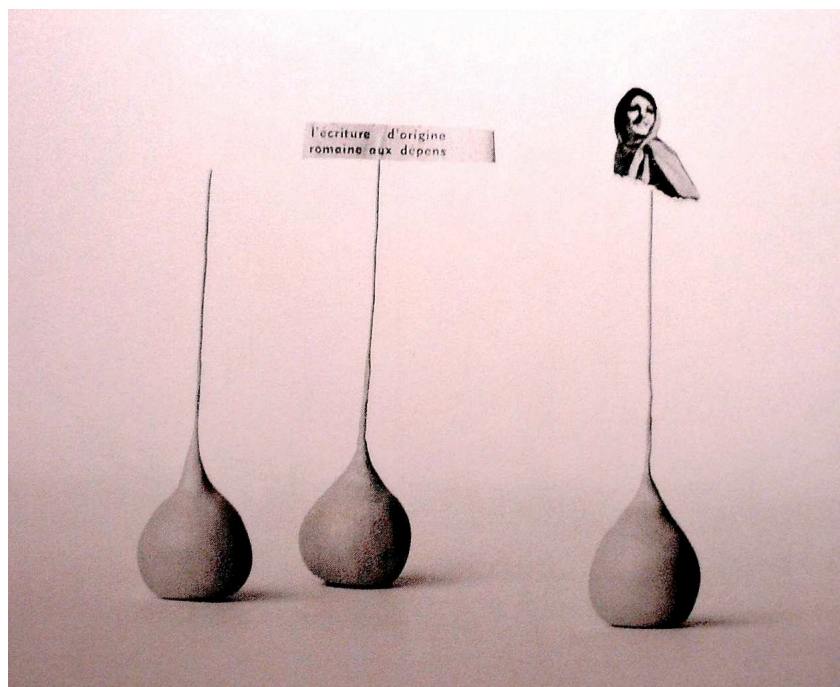


Figure 185. Kitasono Katsue, *Plastic Poem*, VOU #115, 1968

Kitasono defines the plastic poem as “a form of poetry that does not require lines or stanzas, a ‘device for poetry’ that does not require rhythm and meaning.”<sup>388</sup>

<sup>387</sup> Cf. Ferreira Gullar, *A Luta Corporal* [*Corporal Fight*] (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1975).

<sup>388</sup> Kitasono Katsue, “Zōkei-shi ni tsuite no nōto [A Note on the Plastic Poem]” in *VOU* 104 (1966); reprinted in *Kaban no naka no getsuya. Kitasono Katsue no zōkei-shi* [*Moonlight in a Bag. The Plastic Poems of Kitasono Katsue*] (Tokyo: Kokusho, 2002), p. 61.

Like in Ferreira Gullar's late 1950s works, few elements in his "plastic poems" provide immediate clues of their belonging in the realm of poetry. Consisting of black-and-white photographs of meticulously arranged objects over a single-color background, many of the "poems" contained pieces of foreign language newspapers (mostly French and English) and a few contained no trace of writing. Gullar, who once composed a "spatial poem" without a single word, recognized his anxiety about having to choose between poetry and the plastic arts: "I thought, it seems crazy, but this is already plastic arts, and I don't want to be a sculptor."<sup>389</sup> Kitasono, on the other hand, seemed content with solving the dilemma by means of photography; his plastic poems did not consist in the objects themselves but in the photographed *objets*,<sup>390</sup> and as long as he retained the medium of printed-paper and the flatness of the works, their eventual lack of words did not threaten his consciousness of their identity as poems.

Kitasono opens his manifesto of plastic poetry, published in 1966 in his own poetry journal *VOU*, with Michel Ragon's contention that "The era of the spoken word is past and the era of the written word is ended. We have reached the era of image (*eizō*)."<sup>391</sup> In the plastic poems, Kitasono proposed to compose poetry "through the camera viewfinder,<sup>392</sup> thereby liberating poetic creation from the "most inaccurate communicative signs (*motomo fuseikaku na dentatsu na kigō*)" that constitute our language (*kotoba*). In fact, the problem of sign or symbol (*kigō*) had occupied Kitasono's poetry for a long time. The 1929 poem *Kigō setsu* (Semiotic Theory) advances some of the themes that defined his career up until the plastic poems. In a

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<sup>389</sup> Ferreira Gullar, Interview. Cocchiarale and Geiger, *Abstracionismo geométrico e informal: a vanguarda brasileira nos anos cinquenta* [*Geometric and Informal Abstraction: The Brazilian Avant-Garde in the 1950s*], p. 98.

<sup>390</sup> For a discussion of the usage of the French Surrealist concept of *objet* within Japanese artistic circles since the late 1930s see Chapter 5.

<sup>391</sup> Kitasono Katsue, "Zōkei-shi ni tsuite no nōto [A Note on the Plastic Poem]," p. 61.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*

similar way to Gullar, Kitasono devolves language to its material grounds and downplays the specifically verbal aspect of poetic discourse. In contrast to Seth Siegelau's rejoicing over the fact that (conceptual) artists had "finally been accepted as idea men and not merely as craftsmen with poetic thoughts,"<sup>393</sup> both Kitasono and Gullar seek to bring poetry itself closer to the experience of the craftsman in intimate relationship with matter.

First published in the journal *Bungei tanbi* under the title *Hakushoku shishū* (Collection of White Poems)<sup>394</sup> and later reworked for publication in the anthology *Shiro no arubamu* (White Album), *Kigō setsu* was deemed by Kitasono his most original and accomplished poem.<sup>395</sup> The poem is composed of eleven short segments, which are simple in visual composition but extremely visual at the semantic level. In the surface, *Kigō setsu* can be regarded as remarkably objective, in the sense that Roland Barthes described Robbe-Grillet's Nouveau Roman as a form of "objective literature."<sup>396</sup> It relegates the Surrealist exploration of psyche in favor of a dry description and enumeration of objects and colors. Yet, unlike Robbe-Grillet's novels, the apparent objectivity of *Kigō setsu* entails a challenge to the very possibility of objective language; its signs do not possibly refer to actually existing objects outside the poem, but are carefully organized in order to disrupt the very correspondence that grounds signifying language. Under the guise of a "semiotic theory," what Kitasono presents is rather a disruption of the process of signification. Under such conditions, it comes as no surprise that, by means of the "plastic poem," Kitasono's poetry, like

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<sup>393</sup> Seth Siegelau, quoted in Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), p. 152.

<sup>394</sup> Kitasono Katsue, "Hakushoku shishū [Collection of White Poems]" in *Bungei tanbi* 2, no.4 (1927).

<sup>395</sup> Cf. John Solt, *Shredding the Tapestry of Meaning: The Poetry and Poetics of Kitasono Katsue (1902-1978)* (Cambridge: Harvard East Asia Center, 1999).

<sup>396</sup> Roland Barthes, "Objective Literature: Allain Robbe-Grillet" in Allain Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy & in the Labyrinth* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), pp. 11-26.



Gullar in the late 1950s, explicitly relinquished any pretension of reference to external reality and sought to exist as an object in itself.

### **Monotonous Space: Visual Poetry between Japan and Brazil**

Visual poets in the 1950s were particularly keen on establishing a network that transcended national and linguistic boundaries. For the Noigandres group, the potential of communication across linguistic barriers constituted a crucial aspect of visual poetry. In 1957, following Ezra Pound's suggestion, Haroldo de Campos wrote from São Paulo to Kitasono Katsue's VOU Club in Tokyo; he explained the Noigandres poets' understanding of Concrete poetry and attached English translations of poems by members of the group. Haroldo recalls that Kitasono never answered the letter: "He sent me, instead, an issue of the journal he edited, called *VOU*, in which he published a Japanese Concrete poem."<sup>397</sup>

The brief but significant correspondence between Haroldo de Campos and Kitasono was among the few instances of immediate exchange between avant-garde artists working in Brazil and Japan circa 1960.<sup>398</sup> In regard to the circumstances of his involvement with Concretism, Kitasono commented years later: "The people who pulled me into Concrete poetry were the South American Campos brothers [Haroldo and Augusto]. I didn't plan it, but at some point I just slipped in smoothly. ... They always sent me their publications and seemed quite active. Ezra Pound introduced us.

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<sup>397</sup> Maria Esther Maciel, "Ocidente / Oriente. Uma Conversa com Haroldo de Campos [Occident / Orient. A Conversation with Haroldo de Campos]" in *ZUNAI. Revista de Poesia e Debates*. <[www.zunai.com](http://www.zunai.com)>

<sup>398</sup> For further discussion of Kitasono's connection to the Noigandres poets see Solt, *Shredding the Tapestry of Meaning: The Poetry and Poetics of Kitasono Katsue (1902-1978)*, mainly pp. 250-296.

He suggested that Campos and I correspond.”<sup>399</sup> Luis Carlos Vinholes, a Brazilian poet who had been living in Tokyo for a few years, further facilitated their exchange by acting as a mediator between Brazilian Concrete poets and the Japanese literary and artistic establishment; in 1960 he curated an exhibition of Brazilian Concrete poetry at the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo.

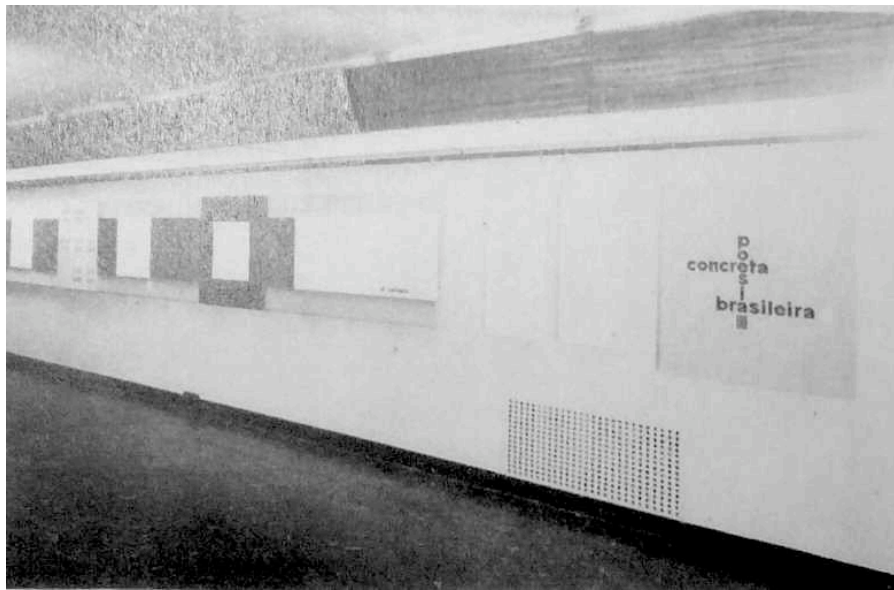


Figure 186. Exhibition of Brazilian Concrete Poetry, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, 1960

The Concretist attempt to include the visual element in poetry went hand-in-hand with a pronounced interest in the principles of so-called “ideographic writing”; under such circumstances, the connection with Kitasono, in whose poetry Haroldo de Campos perceived a radical inquiry into the visuality of writing within the realm of a non-alphabetic writing system, held particular significance within the Noigandres international network. The fact that their initial contact was mediated by Pound, with whom both Campos and Kitasono corresponded for many years, is emblematic of

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<sup>399</sup> Kitasono Katsue, as quoted in Solt, *Shredding the Tapestry of Meaning: The Poetry and Poetics of Kitasono Katsue (1902-1978)*, p. 259.

Haroldo's motivations in contacting the Japanese poet. Not only did Pound act as a broker of their first exchanges, but his poetic explorations of ideographic writing were from the outset a crucial influence on Haroldo's interest in Japanese and Chinese languages.<sup>400</sup>

In May 10<sup>th</sup> 1958, Haroldo published, in the literary supplement of the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*, an article entitled "Japanese Concrete Poetry: Kitasono Katsue." The article included a translation of Kitasono's Concrete poem "*Tanchō na kūkan* (Monotonous Space)" accompanied by a copy of one of its segments in the original Japanese and a brief lexicon of Japanese characters. Haroldo's interpretive decision to translate the Japanese noun for space, *kūkan* – a combination of the Chinese characters *kū* (empty, hollow, sky) and *kan* (interval, space, between) – as "empty space" bears more than a coincidental affinity with Pound's techniques in the *Cantos* and Ernst Fenollosa's theories about the pictorial signification of the ideogram.<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> Cf. Maciel, "Ocidente / Oriente. Uma Conversa com Haroldo de Campos [Occident / Orient. A Conversation with Haroldo de Campos]."

<sup>401</sup> Ernst Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2001).



Figure 187. Haroldo de Campos, “Poesia Concreta no Japão: Kitasono Katsue” in *Suplemento Literário*, *O Estado de São Paulo*, May 10<sup>th</sup> 1958

The article strongly emphasized the proximity of Kitasono’s poem to the Concretist project while attempting to downplay the importance of its Surrealist elements. Haroldo argued that, even if one of the poem’s four segments contained traces of Surrealist techniques, the other three could be considered as genuinely Concrete: “Segments 1, 2 and 4 offer true problems of Concrete composition: they are a sort of Albersian ‘homage to the square’ on the semantic level.”<sup>402</sup> Indeed, the first

<sup>402</sup> Haroldo de Campos, “Poesia Concreta Japonesa: Kitasono Katue [Japanese Concrete Poetry: Kitasono Katue]” in *Suplemento Literário*, *O Estado de São Paulo* (10 May 1958).

segment of *Tanchō na kūkan* seems to verbally construct the image of a geometric abstract canvas, strongly reminiscent of Josef Albers square compositions: “white square / within / white square / within / yellow square / within ...”<sup>403</sup>

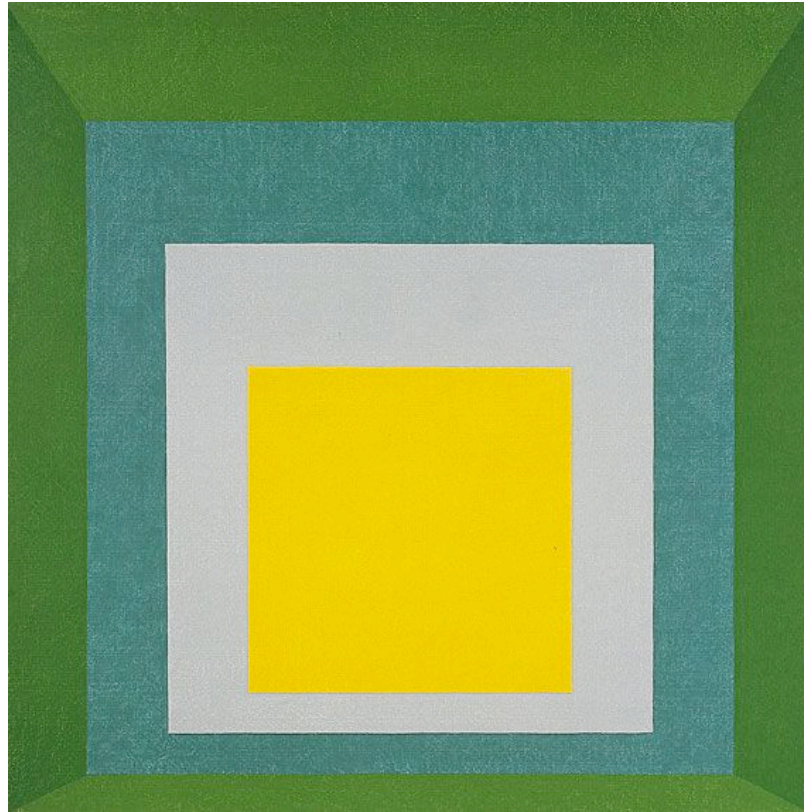


Figure 188. Josef Albers, *Homage to the Square: Aparition*, 1959

Haroldo discerned in Kitasono’s poetry a challenge to discursiveness through experimentation with the structure of the Japanese written language. Among the aspects in the poem that called his attention was the coincidence between the semantic and syntactic level; the very structure of the Japanese genitive particle *no* seemed to induce, in the grammatical level, the structure of the square within another square depicted in the poem. “The usage of a long genitive sequence (whose order is inverse in Japanese; first the complement ruled by “of,” then the person or thing to which it

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<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

refers) reinforces this sense of unfolding, like ‘a box from within another box’ as in the verse by João Cabral.”<sup>404</sup> Curiously, by comparing the genitive structure of Japanese to a “box within another box” Haroldo hit upon a grammatical and logical interpretation of the Japanese language inaugurated by linguist Tokieda Motoki, who described the semantic structure of Japanese language as a “box-in-box structure” (*irekogata kōzō*).<sup>405</sup>

The semantic monotony of the first and second segments of *Tanchō na kūkan* contrasts strongly with the third segment of the poem. Despite its symmetric composition, part 3 of “Monotonous Space” is semantically closer to Surrealist psychic automatism than to the formal experimentation of Concrete poetry. Each of its four strophes starts with a Chinese character signifying a color in the first line – blue, white, black, yellow – while the second line repeats the word *sankaku* (triangle) preceded by the particle *no*. The imagistic core of the segment can be located in the third and fifth lines of each strophe, contrasting each time a Japanese word written in Chinese characters – *hige* (beard), *uma* (horse) ... – with a foreign word in katakana: *garasu* (glass), *parasoru* (parasol), etc. Not only does the apparently free association of images suggests automatic writing, but the contrast between Japanese and foreign words produced by Kitasono is also highly reminiscent of Japanese Surrealism, to which the poet had been strongly connected in the early years of his career.

### **The Poetic Avant-Garde between Surrealism and Concretism**

Kitasono’s association with Concrete poetry, which was mostly a result of his correspondence with the Noigandres group, did not last long. In fact, in literature as

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<sup>404</sup> Ibid.

<sup>405</sup> Cf. Tokieda Motoki, *Kokugogaku Genron [Principles of National Linguistics]* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1941).

well as in the visual arts, Concretism was never a major tendency in Japan. According to the art critic Hirai Shōichi, the title Concrete Art (*gutai geijutsu*), coined by Theo van Doesburg in 1930, had so little currency in postwar Japan that the nominal coincidence with the Osaka-based group Gutai Art Association (Gutai Bijutsu Kyokai) seems to have gone unnoticed by the group's members as well as by other artists and critics at the time.<sup>406</sup> Kitasono welcomed Haroldo's translation of *Tanchō na kūkan* and republished "A Monotonia do Espaço Vazio" in *VOU* 63 (September 1958). However, despite the formal affinities with Concrete poetry present from early on in Kitasono's works, "Monotonous Space" remained his only explicitly "Concrete" poem.

The Surrealist element of "Monotonous Space," on the other hand, had deeper roots in Kitasono's poetic trajectory and in Japanese literary and artistic circles in general. Surrealism had been extremely influential in Japan since the late 1920s and continued to play an important role among avant-garde artists throughout the postwar period. John Solt argues that the impact of Surrealism was more enduring in Japan than anywhere else, even than in its birthplace in France.<sup>407</sup> Moreover, in contrast to France, where the movement can be said to have gradually shifted its emphasis from literature to painting, the Surrealist presence in Japan was evident in painting as in writing. Among avant-garde artists in the 1960s, it was mainly the decisive presence of the poet and critic Takiguchi Shuzō that kept Surrealist ideas and techniques alive in genres ranging from theater and dance to literature and object-based visual arts.

A former student of Nishiwaki Junzaburō, one of the main introducers of Surrealism in Japan, Kitasono joined the Surrealist collective *Shobi Majutsu*

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<sup>406</sup> Hirai Shōichi, Personal interview. 5 June 2006.

<sup>407</sup> Solt, *Shredding the Tapestry of Meaning: The Poetry and Poetics of Kitasono Katsue (1902-1978)*, p. 46.

*Gakusetsu* (Rose, Magic, Theory) in the late 1920s.<sup>408</sup> Nishiwaki's disciples dominated the two major groups of Surrealist authors in Japan at the time. Takiguchi joined the collective that gathered around the publication of the Surrealist collection *Fukuikutaru kafu yo* (*Ah, Fragrant Stoker*), which was known as more orthodox and closer to Breton and the French origins of the movement. The authors involved in the journal *Rose, Magic, Theory*, on the other hand, attempted to develop a trend of Surrealism that Kitasono described as "original to Japan."<sup>409</sup> While the influence of Takiguchi's brand of Surrealism in poetry, the visual arts, and theater throughout the postwar period can hardly be overestimated, Kitasono's orientation did not resonate as strongly with later avant-garde movements. However, due partly to his intense correspondence with avant-garde poets outside Japan and to his efforts to internationally publicize the journal *VOU* – as well as to the immediate translatability of his poetry – he was far better known than Takiguchi among the 1950s and 1960s poetic avant-gardes outside Japan.<sup>410</sup>

Compared to Japan, and also to most Latin American countries, the influence of Surrealism was rather limited in Brazil. Haroldo de Campos contrasted the important role of Surrealism in Mexican literature to its irrelevance within Brazilian modernism; he commented that Octavio Paz, for instance, was "someone who respected very much Breton, who had for Surrealism an esteem which we, Brazilians, do not have."<sup>411</sup> Surrealism, he argued, "was absolutely important for Paz and for the

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<sup>408</sup> Cf. Myriam Sas, *Fault Lines: Cultural Memory and Japanese Surrealism* (Stanford: Stanford U Press, 1999).

<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>410</sup> In the festschrift dedicated to Kitasono Katsue after his death in 1978, Kenneth Rexroth remarked that "Katsue was, for many years, the only Japanese poet known to the international literary community." Cf. Solt, *Shredding the Tapestry of Meaning: The Poetry and Poetics of Kitasono Katsue (1902-1978)*, p. 251.

<sup>411</sup> Maciel, "Conversa com Haroldo de Campos sobre Octavio Paz" in *A Palavra Inquieta: Homenagem a Octavio Paz* (Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 1999).



whole Hispanic-American world, while for us it did not have much interest.”<sup>412</sup> In a sense, Surrealism was the European trend that the 1920s Brazilian Anthropophagic movement could not digest. In proclaiming in the 1928 *Anthropophagite Manifesto* that “we already had the Surrealist language,”<sup>413</sup> he embraced of the basic principles of Surrealist composition, but also signaled his refusal to engage with European Surrealists. Meanwhile, even Oswald’s ambiguous relationship to Surrealism was badly received by other modernist writers such as Carlos Drummond de Andrade and Mário de Andrade, who vehemently rejected the movement. The hegemonic presence of Concretism in 1950s Brazilian poetry is deeply related to this dismissal of Surrealism within Brazilian literary circles.

From the perspective of Surrealism’s search for a discursive mechanism more fundamental than traditional logic, the formal endeavors of Concrete poetry might appear rather superficial. For Concrete poets, on the other hand, the Surrealist attempt to find within the subject a substitute for Aristotelian logic, but without questioning the realm of discursive language, was deemed insufficiently critical. According to Haroldo, “facing the barrier of traditional logic, [Surrealism] did not try to develop a language that would go beyond it; on the contrary, it established its ‘headquarters’ on the *maudit* side of logical-discursive language... Bréton’s ‘white haired revolver’ rules over an absurd reign that is unleashed amid the language ordained by the Aristotelian system...”<sup>414</sup> Beneath or beyond traditional Aristotelian logic, Surrealism attempts to unveil through psychic automatism a more fundamental logic of the unconscious. Concrete poetry, in its turn, targets the unity and independence of discursive language

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<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

<sup>413</sup> Oswald de Andrade, “Manifesto Antropofágico [Anthropophagite Manifesto]” in *Do Pau-Brasil à Antropofagia e às Utopias* [*From Pau-Brasil to Anthropophagy and the Utopias*] (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1978), p. 16.

<sup>414</sup> Haroldo de Campos, “Concrete Poetry – Language – Communication” in *Novas. Selected Writings*, p. 240.

itself, which is left intact by Surrealism. Haroldo writes, “The Concrete poem puts in check the logical structure of traditional discursive language, since it finds in it a barrier to accessing the world of objects.”<sup>415</sup> Concrete poets thereby sought to restore the materiality of the word conceived as a *verbivocovisual* unity, which cannot be totally inscribed in the level of discourse. In Haroldo’s words, “the Concrete poem rejects traditional logic and its crippled brother, ‘psychic automatism’.”<sup>416</sup> What Concretism proposes instead is a form of writing that no longer refers to objects, but exists as an object in itself, among other objects in the world, and holds with them an isomorphic relationship rather than a representative one.

### **Concretism between Poetry and Painting**

In 1952, Décio Pignatari and the brothers Haroldo and Augusto de Campos published the first issue of the avant-garde poetry journal *Noigandres*, named after Pound’s usage of the enigmatic Provençal term in Canto 20.<sup>417</sup> Concrete poetry as the name of an international avant-garde movement was born a few years later, in 1956, from the encounter of Décio Pignatari with the Bolivian-Swiss poet Eugen Gomringer, then working as a secretary of Max Bill at the Hochschule für Gestaltung at Ulm,

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<sup>415</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>417</sup> The word appears in Pound’s description of a visit to the Provençal literature specialist Emil Lévy, in Freiburg, Germany in Canto 20: “And so I went to Freiburg, / And the vacation was just beginning, / The students getting off for the summer, / Freiburg in Breisgau, / And everything clean, seeming clean, after Italy. / And I went to old Lévy and it was by then 6.30 / in the evening, and he trailed half way across Freiburg / before dinner, to see the two strips to copy, / ... / And he said: “Now is there anything I can tell you?” / And I said: I dunno sir, or / “Yes, Doctor, what do they mean by *noigandres*?” / And he said: Noigandres! NOigandres! / You know for seex mon’s of my life / “Effery night when I go to bett, I say to myself: / “Noigandres, eh, *noigandres*, / “Now what the DEFFIL can that mean!” Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions Books, 1996).

Germany. The connection between Swiss Concretism, the Ulm School and São Paulo-based artists in the 1950s proved as fateful in the realm of poetry as it was for the development of Brazilian abstract painting and sculpture.

Concrete poetry derived its name from the term originally coined by Theo Van Doesburg in the 1930 “Manifesto of Concrete Art.” Since the late 1940s, under the influence of Belgian curator Leon Degand, first director of the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art, Concrete Art developed into a dominant trend in the visual arts, if not in Brazil as a whole, at least within the artistic and intellectual circles of the emerging industrial metropolis. The first São Paulo Biennale in 1951 confirmed the hegemony of Concrete Art with the 1<sup>st</sup> international award to the Swiss painter and sculptor Max Bill, a former student of Josef Albers who was deeply influenced by Van Doesburg’s aesthetics. The identification of Concretism with the thriving developmentalist ideology of 1950s Brazil played a fundamental role in the establishment of its aesthetic hegemony; it suited the city’s emerging industrial bourgeoisie, who played a fundamental role in the creation of the country’s new artistic institutions.



Figure 189. Max Bill, *Tripartite Unity*, 1948-49.  
1<sup>st</sup> International Award in the 1<sup>st</sup> São Paulo Biennale, 1951

Similarly to the basic proposal of Concrete painting, the Noigandres poets initiated an all-out attack against the mechanism of representation. In the words of Haroldo de Campos, Concrete poets searched for an art that “presentifies (presentifique)” the object, an “objectal” art, as opposed to an “objective” one.<sup>418</sup> In Concrete poetry, rather than representing objects, “[words] act as autonomous objects.” Similarly to Lygia Clark’s breach of the wooden frame of the canvas, Concrete poetry brought about a rupture of its literary frame; as Ferreira Gullar puts it, “In the same way that color liberated itself from painting, the word liberated itself from poetry. The poet has the word, but no longer a pre-established aesthetic frame in

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<sup>418</sup> Haroldo de Campos, “olho por olho a olho nu” in Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari, *Teoria da Poesia Concreta; textos críticos e manifestos (1950-1960)* [*Theory of Concrete Poetry; Critical Texts and Manifestos (1950-1960)*] (São Paulo: Edições Invenção, 1975), p. 46.

which to skillfully place it.”<sup>419</sup> The “aesthetic frame” of poetry, which Concretists disrupted, ultimately consisted in the discursive structure of language itself. Concrete poetry liberated the word from its logical, abstract function in language and returned it to its full *verbivocovisual* existence as an independent object. In the same way that Concrete music departed from the abstract laws of harmonic conception towards material composition with real sounds,<sup>420</sup> Concrete poetry endeavored to displace the word from the frame of language.

Nevertheless, despite their common title and shared programmatic aesthetics, the Concretism of the Noigandres group was significantly distinct from the proposals of painters such as Waldemar Cordeiro and the São Paulo-based group Ruptura. The *Pilot Plan* defined the Concretist endeavor as a search for an art of space-time, through the intervention of time in the arts of space on the one hand (Mondrian’s Boogie-Woogie series, Max Bill’s topological sculptures), and through the intervention of space in the arts of time on the other (Concrete music, Concrete poetry). However, as Mário Pedrosa noted as early as 1957, the result was that while Concrete poets strived to include the visual dimension in their work, Concrete painters – at least in the most extreme cases, like that of Ruptura painters – tried to take distance from the uncertainties of visuality and to reach a purely intellectual, abstract experience. Concrete poets breached the realm of verbal rhetoric and its logical-signifying frame, and thereby used “the word as a departure point, but disconnected it from all antecedent and subsequent and took it apart as a loose link”; Concrete painters, on the other hand, “in search of pure intellectuality,” aspired “to separate

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<sup>419</sup> Ferreira Gullar, “Diálogo sobre o não-objeto [Dialogue about the Non-Object]” in *Experiência neoconcreta: momento limite da arte [Neoconcrete Experience: Limit-Moment of Art]*, p. 99.

<sup>420</sup> Pierre Schaeffer, *La Musique Concrète [Concrete Music]* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967), p. 16.

themselves entirely from any direct phenomenological experience.”<sup>421</sup> Hélio Oiticica saw in this refusal of phenomenological experience a fundamental shortcoming of Concrete painting that derived mainly from a mechanical understanding of time.<sup>422</sup> A similar understanding of temporality and a similar attempt to downplay the role of sensorial perception marked the emergence of Conceptual Art in 1960s New York. Mário Pedrosa’s observation that Concrete painters seemed to look forward to a time in which the hand itself would become unnecessary and obsolete in the confection of the artwork, and the artist would become “a machine for elaborating ideas to be seen,”<sup>423</sup> foreshadows, in a sense, Sol Lewitt’s 1967 statement that in conceptual artistic practice “the idea becomes a machine that makes the art.”<sup>424</sup>

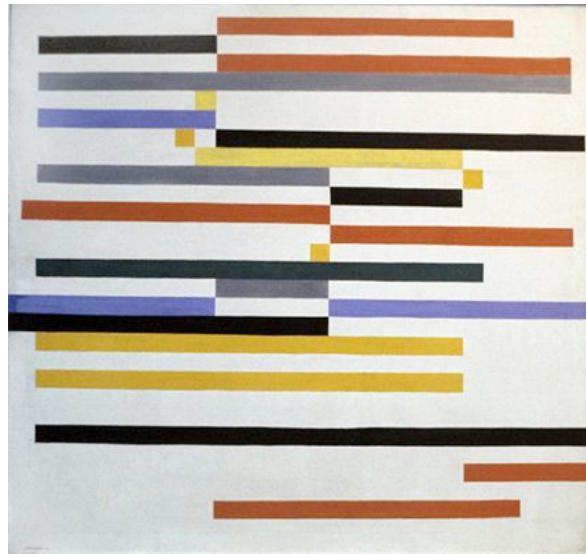


Figure 190. Waldemar Cordeiro, *Movimento* (Movement), 1951

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<sup>421</sup> Mário Pedrosa, “Poeta & Pintor Concretista [Concretist Poet and Concretist Painter]” in *Projeto Construtivo Brasileiro na Arte [Brazilian Constructive Project in the Arts]*, p. 146.

<sup>422</sup> Cf. Hélio Oiticica, “Cor, Tempo, Estrutura [Color, Time, Structure]” in *AGL*, p. 50; *BoC*, p. 206.

<sup>423</sup> Mário Pedrosa, “Poeta & Pintor Concretista [Concretist Poet and Concretist Painter],” p. 146.

<sup>424</sup> Sol Lewitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” in *Conceptual Art: a Critical Anthology*, p. 12.

Concrete poets, though unable to entirely overcome the conventional, mechanical understanding of time, drew attention to the importance of space and thereby moved poetry away from linear temporal succession and revealed the problem of simultaneity as a decisive question of poetic composition.

### **Poetry and Simultaneity**

The Concrete poem interrupts the continuity between writing and verbal language; more accurately, it reveals a breach that the very idea of phonetic scripture attempts to hide or overcome, an insurmountable difference introduced by the very materiality of writing. The Noigandres' *Pilot Plan* defines Concrete poetry as a radical challenge to traditional poetics based on logical-discursive, linear writing and reading. Without abandoning alphabetic phonetic writing, Concrete poetry explores its potential for non-verbal communication through the intervention of graphic, spatial resources. "The Concrete poem," states the *Pilot Plan*, "using phonetics (digits) and analogical syntax, creates a specific linguistic area – *verbivocovisual* – which shares the advantages of nonverbal communication without giving up the word's virtuality."<sup>425</sup> By doing so, Concrete poetry attempts to reveal the ideographic potential inherent to alphabetic writing.

The main question addressed by the poems and theoretical texts of the Noigandres group since the mid 1950s constituted a challenge to the scheme of Saussurean structural linguistics; though hardly noticed outside avant-garde poetry circles in its time, this question proved to be strikingly similar to the one that fed the European intellectual debate during the ensuing decade. In 1967, Jacques Derrida tackled the problem of the materiality of writing as the concealed limit of phonetic

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<sup>425</sup> Augusto de Campos, et al. "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry," p. 218.

scripture, the constitutive *differance* that incessantly introduces a foreign element into the imagined closure of verbal discursive space.<sup>426</sup> Through poetic theory and theoretical poetry, Concrete poets in the 1950s attempted not only to reveal this fundamental characteristic of writing, but also to take advantage of it as the basis of a radical possibility of communication. According to Haroldo de Campos, “the Concrete poem, by regarding the word as an object, accomplishes the feat of bringing to the domain of poetic communication the virtual possibilities of nonverbal communication without losing any of the peculiarities of the word.”<sup>427</sup> Conscious of the materiality of writing, Concrete poets attempted to work through the cracks of phonetic writing and thereby expand the communicative realm of poetry into a *verbivocovisual* system, that is, to include the whole field of optical, acoustic and signifying relations into poetic composition.

The syntactic transformation that takes place in the Concrete poem, which challenges the constitution of discursive language as an independent realm, can be described as a simultaneous expansion and restriction of the communicative field of poetry. On the one hand, Concrete poetry’s acknowledgment of visuality as a fundamental element of writing enlarges its communicative potential. The *Pilot Plan* states that the Concrete poem is “aware of graphic space as structural agent;” it constitutes a “[q]ualified space: space-time structure instead of mere linear-temporal development.”<sup>428</sup> Graphic space becomes a compositional element impregnated with meaning, rather than an exterior aspect of the poem. On the other hand, the enlargement of the poetic field, as a result of the inclusion of the visual element,

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<sup>426</sup> Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

<sup>427</sup> Haroldo de Campos, “Concrete Poetry – Language – Communication” in *Novas*, pp. 243-4.

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.



corresponds to the attempt to restrict the poem's grammatical structure. According to the *Pilot Plan*, this restriction of "outward grammar" through the processes of "nominalization and verbification" takes place in view of a search for the "lowest common denominator of language."<sup>429</sup> Through this twofold operation, the Concrete poem attempts to break away from the linear temporal structure of verbal signification towards the construction of a communicative object in space-time.

The *Pilot Plan* explains the Concretist transformation of poetic composition with recourse to the principles of ideographic writing. Concrete poets understood the ideogram concept primarily in the sense of a "spatial or visual syntax"<sup>430</sup> opposed to the linear syntax of phonetic writing; it offered a general "appeal to nonverbal communication."<sup>431</sup> In relation to poetic composition, the "ideogram" referred to the method devised by Ernst Fenollosa and Ezra Pound "based on direct – analogical, not logical-discursive – juxtaposition of elements."<sup>432</sup> It functioned as a regulative principle for the new poetic syntax, which the Noigandres group proposed. At the same time, the reduction of language to its "lowest common denominator" by elimination of grammar in favor of a "purely relational syntax" suggested the affinity of Concrete poetic composition with the structure of "isolating languages"<sup>433</sup> such as Chinese. The so-called "Chinese model" of writing served as a poetic ideal, both in the sense of its recourse to space and visuality and in terms of its extreme reduction of grammar.

Augusto de Campos's 1953 poem "dias dias dias" presents a cogent example of the Concrete method of poetic composition in its early, radical phase. The

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<sup>429</sup> Ibid., p. 218.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid., p. 218.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid., p. 218.



from the possibility of recitation. Nonetheless, in 1979, the musician and composer Caetano Veloso recorded an interpretation of “dias dias dias.”<sup>434</sup> Caetano’s recorded version of the poem is remarkable for attempting to orally reproduce not only its variations of color through voice modulation, but also the effect of simultaneity (or “synchrony,” in Haroldo’s words) of its different segments. In stereo, Caetano’s different voices seem to come from different places, thus introducing a sense of space even in recitation itself, which constitutes, in principle, the most temporal possibility of poetry.

Ferreira Gullar, on the other hand, harshly criticized the attempt of Noigandres poets to attain with words a similar effect of simultaneity to that which takes place in painting. According to Gullar, Augusto de Campos attempted to write a poem in which each of its structural elements participated in the composition with equal weight, “as in a painting by Mondrian.”<sup>435</sup> Gullar argued that this was an unattainable goal, since, in contrast to painting, poetry realizes itself inevitably in time rather than in space. To put it simply, the time required for the reading of each word did not allow for the simultaneous perception of the poem as a whole in the way it can take place with painting. One could apprehend the color and spatial distribution of the poem, its overall form, in a single act of perception, but not the meaning of its words. Unlike painting, in which “apprehension can take place in a single perceptive act,” Gullar argued, because of being fundamentally verbal, poetry requires succession of time.<sup>436</sup> “The poem in the page gives the illusion of such simultaneity. And it is possible,” he added, that this simultaneity “realizes itself for you [the poet], the source, who does

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<sup>434</sup> Caetano Veloso and Augusto de Campos, “dias dias dias/Volta” in *Caetano Veloso: Singles*, compact disc (1999).

<sup>435</sup> Ferreira Gullar, “Letter to Augusto de Campos” in *Experiência neoconcreta: momento limite da arte* [*Neoconcrete Experience: Limit-Moment of Art*], p. 113.

<sup>436</sup> *Ibid.*

not need to decipher the meaning of each sentence.”<sup>437</sup> For the reader, on the other hand, unfamiliar with the meaning of the words, the effect of simultaneity would be inevitably lost as soon as s/he attempted to actually *read* the poem, as opposed to merely looking at it as a visual, non-verbal object.

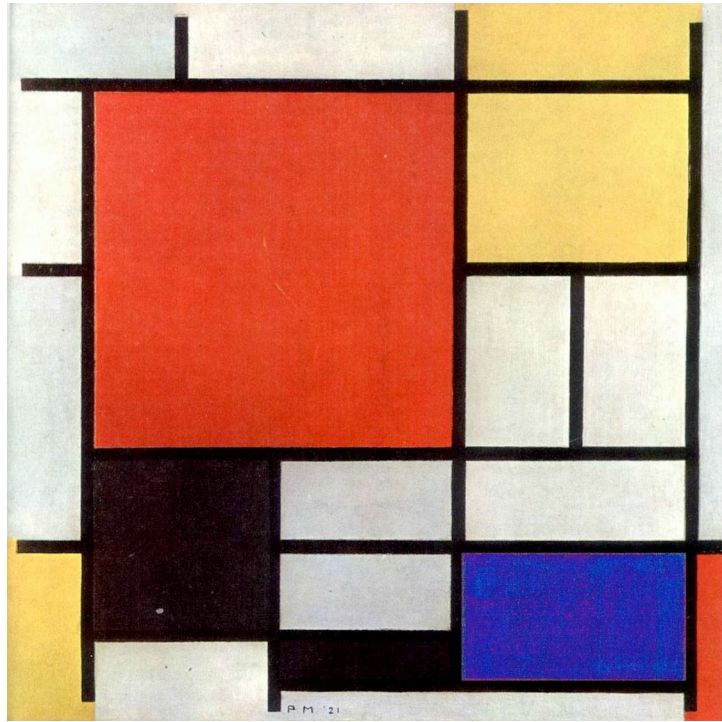


Figure 192. Piet Mondrian, *Composition*, 1921

### **Ideogram and Translatability**

Partly as an attempt to conceptualize the possibility of simultaneity in poetry, Haroldo de Campos borrows from Ezra Pound and Ernst Fenollosa the notion of an ideographic method of poetic composition. Obviously for Pound, but also in the case of Fenollosa, the interpretation of Chinese ideographic writing was a matter of poetic translation rather than a scientific philological endeavor. Fenollosa located the main

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<sup>437</sup> Ibid.

characteristic of Chinese writing in its “pictoriality.” In contrast to seventeenth-century European thinkers who admired the philosophical, arbitrary character of Chinese writing in comparison to Egyptian hieroglyphs, Fenollosa saw the Chinese language as a “mirror of nature.” The very absence of explicit grammatical cannons, Haroldo observes, constituted for Fenollosa a proof of the fidelity of Chinese writing “to the dynamics of the natural processes of energy relations.”<sup>438</sup> For Fenollosa, each part of a Chinese character should be looked upon as meaningful on its own, and thus implicitly constitutive of the signifying potential of the character as a whole. In relation to the translation of poetry, this meant that the translator should pay attention not only to the conventional meaning of the word as a whole in a certain context, but also to each of its constitutive characters and, within these characters, to each of its radicals. The character 愁, as in the Japanese “*urei*” (anxiety, affliction), which consists of the character for “autumn” (秋 = *aki*) placed on top of the character for “heart” (心 = *shin* or *kokoro*) could be translated, “à la Verlaine, as autumn over the heart.”<sup>439</sup>

Fenollosa’s pictorial understanding of Chinese writing was harshly criticized by Sinologists, who disparaged his speculations and took him to task for lack of scientific knowledge of Chinese philology and the actual composition of Chinese characters. Yu-Kuang Chu dismisses Fenollosa’s pictorial readings of Chinese characters on the grounds that current pictographic characters have changed so much from their original composition that present-day Chinese readers consider them as mere conventional symbols.<sup>440</sup> Sinologists, writes Haroldo, “share a common tendency to reject as completely fanciful this possibility of an etymo-poetico-graphemic

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<sup>438</sup> Haroldo de Campos, “Poetic Function and Ideogram / The Sinological Argument” in *Novas*, p. 292.

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302.

<sup>440</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

reading” of Chinese characters.<sup>441</sup> Haroldo’s extensive defense of Fenollosa against the “Sinological argument” can be summarized in the claim that the “validity (if not veracity) [of Fenollosa’s argument] can only be measured properly by the exercise of the relevant function, that is, the poetic function of language, ultimate aim of Fenollosa’s analysis.”<sup>442</sup> Despite its alleged inaccuracies in relation to the current regimes of reading of the Chinese language, the pictorial reading of Chinese characters functioned as a precious model for a poetic, creative translation of poetry, as well as for poetic composition in non-ideographic languages.

The Noigandres poets were not alone in emphasizing the importance of Fenollosa’s speculations on the ideogram, despite its imprecision and lack of scientific rigor in relation to Chinese language itself. The “most spectacular acknowledgement of Fenollosa’s contribution,” writes Haroldo in 1977, would come much later, from France, through the voice of “Jacques Derrida, one of the most brilliant philosophers of the new generation.”<sup>443</sup> In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida pointed out that the first rupture with the deeply-rooted Western phonocentric tradition came from poetry rather than philosophy, namely from the inclusion of the graphic element into poetry by Fenollosa and Ezra Pound, on the one hand, and Mallarmé, on the other. A fact which, according to Haroldo, “Brazilian Concrete poets have been affirming and reaffirming in a way or another, since at least 1955...”<sup>444</sup> Indeed, the poems, manifestoes and essays by the Noigandres group anticipate a number of the arguments that would constitute Derrida’s discussion of phonocentrism in the late 1960s. Besides

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<sup>441</sup> Ibid., p. 301.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid.

<sup>443</sup> Haroldo de Campos, “Ideograma, Anagrama, Diagrama: Uma Leitura de Fenollosa [Ideogram, Anagram, Diagram: A Reading of Fenollosa]” in *Ideograma: lógica, poesia, linguagem [Ideogram: Logic, Poetry Language]* (São Paulo: Editora Cultrix, 1977), p. 27.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

debates concerning personal originality and precedence, what is at stake in the vehemence of Haroldo's claim is the fact that, in order to be properly received, a certain theoretical argument must be made by a "philosopher" writing in French, rather than by a poet from a peripheral country writing in a peripheral language. The irony here consists partly in that the argument itself points to a precedence of poetry over philosophy and, moreover, to the disruptive intervention of a "non-Western" element into the continuity of the Western poetic tradition.

The dispute between Fenollosa and the Sinologists concerning the possibility of a pictorial reading of Chinese characters cannot be solved by recourse to current usage nor to the etymology of Chinese characters themselves. What is at stake in this debate is a decision between two regimes of reading, whose necessity is not inscribed in the characters themselves, but is always *ideologically* determined. Naoki Sakai points out this basic condition of the act of reading in his study of linguistic and philological discourses in eighteenth century Japan. Sakai's analysis of Motoori Norinaga's attempt to find in the *Kojiki*<sup>445</sup> a faithful reproduction of the speech of ancient Japanese provides a powerful example of the crucial role of ideology in the practice of reading.<sup>446</sup> Among classical texts available in eighteenth century Japan, some were written in observance of Chinese syntax, while others used Chinese characters simply as a means for recording the sounds of speech. Their usage varied according to the different contexts of reading and writing. The privileging of a certain mode of reading based on the phonetic value of Chinese characters rather than on their ideographic meaning became a central issue for so-called National Studies (*kokugaku*) scholars such as Motoori Norinaga, who attempted to find the grounds of an

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<sup>445</sup> *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters) is Japan's oldest chronicle. Cf. Motoori Norinaga, *Kojiki-den* (Ithaca: Cornell University East Asia Program, 1997).

<sup>446</sup> Naoki Sakai, *Voices of the Past. The Status of Language in Eighteenth-Century Japanese Discourse*, 1992, pp. 240-279.

authentically Japanese linguistic community on the shared voices of ancient texts. Yet, such attempts reveal much more about the political project of eighteenth-century Japanese National Studies than about an inherent characteristic of Chinese writing itself, since the decision between the phoneticist or ideographical reading of Chinese characters, as Sakai argues, is inevitably an ideological matter:

Such categories as phoneticism and ideography are matters of ideology par excellence in the sense (not entirely unrelated to Louis Althusser's rather well known definition of ideology) that each of them is a specific mode of the human being's imaginary *and* practical relationship to the text and that one's investment of desire in the perception of texts is regulated by a set of rules. ... For this reason, it is pointless to talk about the ideographic nature of the system of Chinese characters or the phonetic nature of Japanese kana or even of alphabetical signs, except in relation to the accompanying ideology.<sup>447</sup>

Since writing and reading constitute fundamental modes of sociality, the decision between different ideological regimes of reading and their relation to speech is inexorably a political matter. In Tokugawa Japan, as Sakai demonstrates, the attempt to trace clear boundaries between different regimes of reading, to distinguish between authentically Japanese and Chinese texts, emerges together with the endeavor to demarcate the borders of a certain political community. Phoneticism, the employment of text as an instrument (or supplement) for the recording of voice, has been historically complicit with the establishment of a historical community of speech. The ideographic reading of characters, on the other hand, as Motoori feared, gives way to a mode of signifying which can potentially transcend its original space and time. It is precisely that sort of transcendence, identified with *karagokoro*, or Chinese mind, which Motoori sought to avoid in his phonocentric reading of the *Kojiki*. Such a transcendental mode of signification is what Fenollosa, as well as Pound and Haroldo de Campos after him, embraced as the "Chinese model" of writing.

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<sup>447</sup> Ibid., p. 253.



### From word to object

Kitasono's move away from Concrete poetry can be characterized as a radicalization of the tendency to fuse poetry and the visual arts, which the Surrealist and Concretist experiments with the visuality of writing initiated. Despite his dismissal of verbal language as an inherently inadequate means of expression, Kitasono never entirely abandoned the written word. Not only did he continue to write verbal poetry until the end of his life, but most of his plastic poems also contained at least some form of inconspicuous or wittily disguised written inscription. More than an excuse for the usage of the word "poem" as a fashionable packaging term for his photographic works, the printed word within or among Kitasono's photographed *objets* remained a sign of his insistent pursuit of the material integration of word and object.



Figure 193. Kitasono Katsue, *Plastic Poem*, VOU # 121, 1969

On the other hand, a fundamental theoretical rupture marks Gullar's trajectory from Concrete poetry to the "book-poem" and the Neoconcrete "non-objects." The phenomenological turn of Neoconcretism introduced a conception of artistic creation based on material practice and the subjective intuition of time as duration, which disrupted the mechanical understanding of time that grounded Concretist poetics. In 1957, Mário Pedrosa theorized the difference between Concretist poets and painters as an opposition between phenomenological experience and pure intellectuality. "The Concrete poetic activity," he writes, "even in a precise engineer of poems like Augusto de Campos or Décio Pignatari, is always passionately phenomenological."<sup>448</sup> In an article published that same year, Haroldo confirmed Pedrosa's assessment but saw in the phenomenological tendencies of poetic Concretism a shortcoming rather than a positive quality in relation to Concretist painting. Haroldo's article, entitled "From the Phenomenology of Composition to the Mathematics of Composition,"<sup>449</sup> proposed a staunch rejection of phenomenology in favor of a rational poetics, which was far removed from any trace of personal experience. Shortly thereafter, Ferreira Gullar's response to the Noigandres group, "Concrete Poetry, Intuitive Experience" denounced the misguided "subjugation of poetry to mathematical structures."<sup>450</sup> The article

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<sup>448</sup> Mário Pedrosa, "Poeta & Pintor Concretista [Concretist Poet and Concretist Painter]," p. 145.

<sup>449</sup> Haroldo de Campos, "Da Fenomenologia da Composição à Matemática da Composição [From the Phenomenology of Composition to the Mathematic of Composition]" in *Suplemento Dominical do Jornal do Brasil* [*Sunday Supplement of Jornal do Brasil*] (18 February 1957); reprinted in Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari, *Teoria da Poesia Concreta; textos críticos e manifestos (1950-1960)* [*Theory of Concrete Poetry; Critical Texts and Manifestos (1950-1960)*], p. 94.

<sup>450</sup> Ferreira Gullar "Poesia Concreta: Experiência Intuitiva [Concrete Poetry: Intuitive Experience]," p. 78.

signaled the first major rupture between the Rio- and São Paulo-based collectives, which was made official two years later in the Neoconcrete Manifesto.<sup>451</sup>

Gullar's experiments with the temporality of reading in the book-poem follow a significantly different, almost opposite path from the search for simultaneity in Haroldo's ideographic model of composition. The time of turning the pages is essentially the time of praxis, of a relationship with the constraints of matter; it brings the written word and the act of reading back to its intrinsic material, bodily condition. With their demand for participation by the reader/spectator, the book-poem and the spatial poems anticipate a defining aspect of Neoconcretism. According to Gullar, the experience of turning the pages inaugurated the path that led to Lygia Clark's *Bichos* (Beasts):

The idea of the movement that will end in *Bicho* comes from the book, which is naturally an object to be unfolded. When I took the book and made the page-turning a constitutive act of the poem, by cutting the pages of the book and putting words behind the pages, assembling, juxtaposing and thus creating an object with the pages, this resonated with the work of Lygia.<sup>452</sup>

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<sup>451</sup> Ferreira Gullar, "Manifesto Neoconcreto [Neoconcrete Manifesto]" in *Suplemento Dominical do Jornal do Brasil* (22 March 1959); reprinted in *Projeto Construtivo Brasileiro na Arte [Brazilian Constructive Project in the Arts]*, pp. 80-84.

<sup>452</sup> Ferreira Gullar, Interview. Cocchiarale and Geiger, *Abstracionismo geométrico e informal: a vanguarda brasileira nos anos cinquenta [Geometric and Informal Abstraction: The Brazilian Avant-Garde in the 1950s]*, p. 98.



Figure 194. Hélio Oiticica, *Parangolé “Incorporo a Revolta”* (Parangolé “I Embody Revolt”), 1967

Oiticica’s usage of written inscriptions in the late 1960s *Parangolés* resonates even more strongly with the principle inaugurated in the book-poem. In *Parangolé “I Embody Revolt”* (1967), the unveiling of writing, which started with the action of turning the pages, becomes a full-body experience by the participant-spectator, whose movements unfold layers of fabric to reveal the writing. What Oiticica termed the “semantic participation”<sup>453</sup> in the work triggers a bodily revolt, whose expression through movement reveals and brings to life the inscription. Under the military dictatorship, which governed Brazil since 1964, the *Parangolé* suggested yet another level of participation, namely in the form of social and political revolt. Rather than a dematerialization of the work of art, Oiticica’s recourse to the written word both

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<sup>453</sup> Hélio Oiticica, “Esquema Geral da Nova Objectividade [General Scheme of the New Objectivity]” in *Aspiro ao Grande Labirinto* [In Search of the Great Labyrinth], p. 91.

presupposes and brings about a long-term process of materialization of language in the art object. Beyond Neoconcretism, the principles of this materialized poetry remained decisive for avant-garde artistic practices throughout the 1960s.

## CHAPTER 7

### THE TICKLISH OBJECT



Figure 195. Akasegawa Genpei, *Model 1,000-Yen Note*, 1963

In a well-known account of the origins of object-based art in early 1960s Tokyo, Akasegawa Genpei describes the liberating experience of young participants of the “Yomiuri Independent Exhibition,” who left behind the limited space of the canvas and moved towards three-dimensional reality. Under the festive atmosphere of the “Yomiuri Anpan,”<sup>454</sup> as the exhibition was known among habitués, a competition seemed to have sprung up that led painters to include increasingly larger and heavier protrusions in their canvases, until the works were no longer able to hold to the wall. Akasegawa recalls:

I think that we were all entranced by the notion of the *objet* as a new possibility. It was at this point that we began to increase the volume of the material further by the inclusion of fragments of tinfoil and shreds of

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<sup>454</sup> Abbreviated form of *Yomiuri Andependan Ten* (Yomiuri Independent Exhibition).



underwear. Perhaps we first became aware of the power of material objects in the undulations they made on the flat picture surface? In the knowledge that this was not paint but simple, everyday objects, had we not discovered the minimum separation between painting and real life?

At least so it seemed to me. I held in my hand the explosive to fuse fiction and the real world and I could foresee that flat and closed pictorial space could now be twisted out into three dimensions. (...) This soon went beyond the boundaries of what the picture surface could support and the projections began to fall off. In this way the picture was left behind and we began to look at different kinds of objects lying on the floor.<sup>455</sup>



Figure 196. Nakanishi Natsuyuki, *Clothespins Assert Churning Action*, “15<sup>th</sup> Yomiuri Independent Exhibition,” Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, March 1963

Despite its alleged continuity with a process that started in abstract painting, the beginning of object art in postwar Japan was most frequently experienced as a

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<sup>455</sup> Akasegawa Genpei, “The 1960s. The art which destroyed itself: an intimate account” in *Reconstructions: Avant-garde Art in Japan 1945-1965*, exhibition catalogue, (New York: Hyperion Books, 1986), p. 86. For a more detailed discussion of the Yomiuri Independent Exhibition, cf. Akasegawa Genpei, *Ima ya akushon aru nomi! “Yomiuri Andepandan” to iu genshō* [Now Action is all that’s left! The “Yomiuri Independent” Phenomenon] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1985).

radical rupture rather than as smooth transition. Similarly to Ferreira Gullar's account of the transformations of Lygia Clark's work and the Neoconcrete movement, Akasegawa explains the emergence of object-based art in terms of an "explosion," a rupture whose implications regarded the essence of art itself; the ontological constitution of expression in Miyakawa Atsushi's terms. By "twisting out" the closed pictorial space of the flat canvas into three dimensions, object art seemed to erase the clear limits between fiction and the real world, between art and everyday life.

If the frame, in what Jacques Derrida once referred to as its *parergonal*<sup>456</sup> quality, demarcates the limits between inside and outside of the fictional space of painting, and thus mediates its insertion in social reality, outside the frame art exists as an indefinite and unbounded presence. Avant-garde (anti-)artists in early 1960s Tokyo sought to extricate their *objets* from the physical frame of the canvas and, perhaps most importantly, to dissociate their "actions" from the discursive frame of "art." What Miyakawa termed anti-art's "descent to the everyday" consists, in fact, in their relentless struggle to extricate art from its material and discursive frames and to let it exist "namelessly" in society.

This chapter examines the emergence and articulations of the notions of *objet* and "action" in Japanese art circa 1960; it explores the avant-garde's pursuit of an immediate relationship to society and politics, beyond the framing effect of "art" as a discursive, institutionalized category. Rather than providing a general panorama of the transformations of art in 1960s Japan, it focuses on a few significant trends. Under a series of rather unusual circumstances, Akasegawa was forced to think, perhaps further than anyone else in 1960s Japan, about the political implications of art and its vexed relationship to the state. As a result, his works and theories occupy a central place in this analysis.

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<sup>456</sup> Cf. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*.



### **The *objet* in practice and theory**

With some perplexity, Miyakawa observed that the neo-dadaist trends and the tendency to “*objetification*” that characterized the phenomenon of anti-art in early 1960s Tokyo emerged, to some extent, as a development of *Informel* painting.<sup>457</sup> The short-lived avant-garde collective formed by Akasegawa, Shinohara Ushio, Arakawa Shūsaku and other participants of the Yomiuri exhibit under the name of Neo Dadaism Organizers<sup>458</sup> played a crucial role in this process that took art beyond the canvas frame into the everyday life of the city. Implicitly subscribing to Miyakawa’s view of the origins of postwar Japanese anti-art, the critic Kuroda Raiji affirms that the Neo Dada group “decisively shifted the direction of the avant-garde from the gestural abstraction of *Art Informel* to anti-art (*han-geijutsu*) inundated by *objets* (readymade everyday objects) and Happenings in and around 1960.”<sup>459</sup> Yet, whereas the role of *Informel* in this context cannot be overlooked, the radical developments of abstract painting into the *objets* and “actions” of the postwar neo-dadaists would not have been possible without the theoretical legacies of prewar Dada and Surrealism. Not that the postwar neo-dadaists should be understood as a repetition or copy of the early twentieth century movements; nonetheless, the appropriation of some basic trends and theories of early Dada and Surrealism into the context of what Neo Dada member Yoshino Tatsumi once referred as the “occupation culture”<sup>460</sup> of postwar Japan was

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<sup>457</sup> Miyakawa Atsushi, “Henbō no suii: Montaju-fu ni [A History of Change: In Montage-like Compilation],” p. 48.

<sup>458</sup> There are different versions of the group’s initial name; later it came to be known simply as Neo Dada. Cf. Kuroda Raiji, “A Flash of Neo Dada: Cheerful Destroyers in Tokyo” in *Josai University Review of Japanese Culture and Society: 1960s Japan, Art Outside the Box* 17 (December 2005).

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.* p. 52.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*

crucial for the development of the art of the 1960s. The ubiquitous notion of art as *objet* in early 1960s Tokyo reveals important traces of the postwar avant-garde's theoretical lineage, as well as some of its significant departures from it.



Figure 197. Yoshimura Masunobu advertising the third exhibition of Neo-Dada Organizers in Ginza, Tokyo, 1960

A trivial ambiguity in the common use of the term “object,” as sheer thing, on the one hand, and as that which only exists in relation to a perceiving subject, on the other, played an important role in the terminology of twentieth century avant-garde art. The attempt of Surrealism to liberate the object from its everyday functions and usages and to transform it into an independent entity endowed with a kind of quasi-subjective will relies partly on this double-edged character of the word “object” in French and other modern European languages. The Surrealist object itself oscillates between these two semantic poles of the term; on one side there is the “found object” (*objet trouvé*) portrayed as the real agent of the action of finding, the object that finds

the artist, on the other extreme, there is Breton's proposition of the construction of dream-conceived objects (*objets apparus en rêve*), the objectification in reality of the subject's imagination.<sup>461</sup> The endeavor to liberate the object-as-thing from the constraints of objectivity plays a central role among the Surrealist-inflected Neo-Dadaists of 1960s Tokyo. Transposed intact from Breton's vocabulary into the Japanese artistic vocabulary, the word *objet* becomes the center of a material-theoretical inquiry into the radical possibilities of art outside the frame.

The first appearances of the word *objet* in Japanese artistic discourse date from the late 1930s. The poet and critic Takiguchi Shūzō is credited with introducing the term in two articles published 1938 in the Japanese photography journal *Photo Times*.<sup>462</sup> The philosophical questioning of the "object," which occupied the thoughts of Surrealist authors and painters since the early years of the movement<sup>463</sup> acquired particular visibility with the publication of the May 1936 issue of the French art journal *Cahiers d'Art* entirely dedicated to the different guises of the Surrealist object, and with an exhibition on the theme at the Paris Charles Raton Gallery the same month.<sup>464</sup> In the aftermath of the French exhibition, in an essay entitled "Objects and Photography: Especially Concerning the Surrealist *Objet*,"<sup>465</sup> Takiguchi approached

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<sup>461</sup> Cf. André Breton, "Crise de l'objet [Crisis of the Object]" in *Cahiers d'Art* v.11 (May 1936), pp. 21-26.

<sup>462</sup> Takiguchi Shūzō, "Shashin to kaiga no kōryū [The exchange between Photography and Painting]" in *Foto Taimusu* (May 1938) and "Buttai to shashin. Toku-ni sururearisumu no obu je ni tsuite [Object and Photography. Particularly concerning the Surrealist *Objet*]" *Foto Taimusu* (August 1938). Cf. Anne Tucker, *The History of Japanese Photography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp.150-1.

<sup>463</sup> Breton writes in the beginning of the 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism*: "Man, that inveterate dreamer, daily more discontent with his destiny, has trouble assessing the objects he has been led to use, objects that his nonchalance has brought his way, or that he has earned through his own efforts..."

<sup>464</sup> Cf. *Cahiers d'Art* v.11, (May 1936).

<sup>465</sup> Takiguchi Shūzō, "Buttai to shashin. Toku-ni sururearisumu no obu je ni tsuite [Object and Photography. Particularly concerning the Surrealist *Objet*]," quoted in Tucker, *The History of Japanese Photography*, p. 151.

the Surrealist connotations of the term *objet* and advocated its importance in the context of photography. “The function of photography is to discover the *objet* and to provide us with revelation,”<sup>466</sup> Takiguchi writes, criticizing what he perceived as a pictorialistic tendency in Japanese Surrealist photography at the time.

The word *objet* is transposed directly from the context of French Surrealism, and reaches the Japanese artistic vocabulary stripped of its ordinary meaning of “object,”<sup>467</sup> both in the sense of that which is perceived by a subject and of a thing we use or encounter in everyday life. Deprived of the ambiguity inherent to its usage in the French original, the Japanese term *objet* (*obuje*) came to be defined almost unequivocally as “a method of contemporary art after Dadaism and Surrealism,” consisting of the act of “isolating a ready-made article (*kiseihin*) or natural thing (*shizen-butsumu*) from its original function and place, and presenting it as it is as an independent work (*sakuhin*), thus attributing to it a symbolic, illusionary meaning different from its everyday meaning.”<sup>468</sup> Curiously, the movement of transposition of the term *objet* into Japanese performs an analogous operation to the method of *objet-art* itself, insofar as it isolates the concept from its everyday usage into the almost magical meaning conferred to it by Surrealism. Since that time, the term *objet* becomes increasingly popular within avant-garde art milieus, in genres ranging from photography to theater and even flower arrangement (*ikebana*).

In the early 1960s, when avant-garde painters transitioned into three-dimensional, object-based art, the term *objet* seemed to fit perfectly the need for a conceptual understanding of their new experiments. In his narrative of the “discovery”

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<sup>466</sup> Ibid.

<sup>467</sup> In Japanese: *mono* or *buttai* as a synonym of “thing,” *taisho* in the sense of the object as “target,” *kyakutai* as the counterpart of the subject of action (*shutai*) and *kyakugo* as the grammatical object.

<sup>468</sup> *Daijirin*. Japanese dictionary (Tokyo: Sanseido, 1988).

of the *objet* by the participants of the Yomiuri Independent, Akasegawa acknowledges that at that point the concept itself was not entirely new: “We had met it earlier in texts of the 1930s, in which we had read about the *objets* of Dadaists like Duchamp and Man Ray.”<sup>469</sup> And although those were “only a faint memory of things seen in old periodicals, like pages out of a history book,” it was immediately in reference to those memories that those artists attempted to theoretically frame the discovery to which they had arrived “through intuition” and by using their “bare hands.”<sup>470</sup> This relationship to the context of the prewar Japanese avant-gardes is perhaps most vigorously present in Akasegawa’s own works and writings, and particularly in his understanding of the *objet*, whose affinities with Takiguchi the critic Tatehata Akira insightfully pointed out.<sup>471</sup> For Akasegawa as for Takiguchi, more than just the definition of an artistic “technique,” the notion of the *objet* is heavily loaded with philosophical and political implications.

### **Immediate relationship to society**

Once painting explodes beyond the canvas, and the limits are blurred between fiction and the real world, art acquires an entirely different insertion in society, no longer mediated by aesthetic distance. In Miyakawa’s terms, with the *objet*, (anti-)art descends from its isolated, veiled existence into the realm of everyday life. According to Akasegawa, for the young habitués of the Yomiuri Anpan who experienced the transition from painting into *objet* art, this new, immediate relationship to society was a fundamental aspiration, rather than mere consequence of their experiments. They

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<sup>469</sup> Akasegawa Genpei, “The 1960s. The art which destroyed itself: an intimate account,” p. 86.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid.

<sup>471</sup> Cf. Tatehata Akira, *Toi naki kaitō. Obuje to chōkoku* [Answers without Questions. *Objet* and Sculpture] (Tokyo: Goryū shoin, 1998), p. 8.

perceived the conventional modes of insertion of the work of art in society, as objects of contemplation in galleries and museums, as insufficient, inefficient and inadequate to their aspirations of political intervention; they strived to bypass “art” itself as institutionalized practice and to reach the public in its everyday life, stripped of its aesthetic categories and criteria of judgment.

Akasegawa points out this sort of dissatisfaction with traditional modes of politicized art as one of the main reasons why a number of young artists switched from the social and socialist realist tendencies of the “Nihon Independent Exhibition” to the more experimental atmosphere of the Yomiuri show. The difference between the two Independent art exhibits, which took place annually, roughly at the same time in Tokyo, consisted in way more than a matter of form or fashion; at stake was the difference between two different modes of relationship between art and politics, between two conceptions of the “avant-garde.”



Figure 198. Uchida Iwao, *Red Flags*, “Second Nihon Independent Exhibition,” 1948

The political character of the socialist realist paintings that used to set the tone of the Nihon Independent Exhibition was rather patent and straightforward. According to Akasegawa, it was precisely the promise of a role for painting in the process of social transformation, of a possibility of political intervention through art that attracted many young artists to the exhibition and to the techniques of socialist realism around the mid 1950s. In his own words, “even in a simple painted canvas we desired some immediate correspondence with society (*shakai to no chokusetsu-na taiō*). As a result, we thought that drawing workers was the novelty of painting.”<sup>472</sup> Yet, at some point, that conventional, well-behaved form of expression came to look insufficient for its revolutionary content. Insofar as it maintained intact the contemplative distance between the spectator and work, the different realisms conserved painting in its conventional place vis-à-vis society. Akasegawa compared this failure of socialist realism as a political tool to the bureaucratization of socialist revolutionary politics:

This desire for immediacy was what first attracted painters to so-called Socialist Realist painting. However, this quickly became a pattern, and this pattern ended up playing the function of a sort of dike conserving the distance between painting and real society. This is roughly the same as what happens in politics with the bureaucratization of the revolutionary government.<sup>473</sup>

Such was the moment in which Akasegawa and his peers took their first steps into the Yomiuri exhibit. His description of his generation’s dissatisfaction with the means of political art characteristic of the Nihon Independent reveals an interesting perspective on the political significance of the radical experiments of the Yomiuri exhibit. “Many young painters switched over from the ‘Nihon ...’ to the ‘Yomiuri ...’,” Akasegawa comments, “One can think of many reasons for that. I think the

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<sup>472</sup> Akasegawa Genpei, *Ima ya akushon aru nomi! “Yomiuri Andependan” to iu genshō* [Now Action is all that is left! The “Yomiuri Independent” Phenomenon], p. 64.

<sup>473</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

strongest attractiveness [of the “Yomiuri Independent”] was due to the painters’ ardent desire for painting’s immediate correspondence with real society (*genjitsu shakai ni taiō suru gaka no chokusetsusei*).<sup>474</sup> Granted, it would be hardly convincing to attribute such degree of consciousness and reflexivity about the political significance of art to Anpan exhibitors as a whole; their artistic experiments were by no means part of a concerted political strategy. In fact, the brilliance of Akasegawa’s analysis consists in convincingly formulating the political edge of early 1960s anti-art, of which the artists themselves were often unaware. One might argue that the youth’s desire for action and immediateness, its inherent impatience with mediate forms of action is nothing new; yet, what is significant about that historical moment is that such impulses could become the trigger for a radical transformation of the institution of art and its modes of social insertion. The experimental and seemingly apolitical character of the Yomiuri Independent appears under this perspective as a search for radical and immediate modes of social participation and intervention.

Akasegawa’s view of the political impulse that grounded the radical experimentalism of early 1960s anti-art illuminates the possibility of a definition of the avant-garde beyond the opposition between the artistic and political vanguards. Donald Egbert, in his already classical essay “The Idea of ‘Avant-Garde’ in Art and Politics,” summarizes the fundamental dilemma of the avant-garde artist since Saint-Simon’s introduction of this military metaphor as an artistic concept as follows:

Should he devote his art directly to forwarding radical social ideas as a member of an elite social avant-garde in accordance with the later doctrines of Saint-Simon, and still later those of Marxists and Marxist-Leninists? If so,

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<sup>474</sup> Ibid., p. 67.



must his art be socially realistic? ... Or, on the contrary, should the artist consider himself to be simply a member of a purely artistic avant-garde?<sup>475</sup>

In early 1960s Tokyo, anti-art practitioners abandoned social and socialist realism not in view of adhering or returning to a concept of “art for art’s sake” or to a “purely artistic avant-garde” but, on the contrary, in favor of a more immediate engagement with society. In view of such a goal, it was not only social realism but the very title of “art” that they renounced and opposed, towards a paradigm of social practice defined simply as “action.”

For those artists, more than the idea of avant-garde itself, it was the notion of action (*akushon*) that signaled the fundamental link between artistic and political practice. The title of Akasegawa’s volume of essays about the Yomiuri Anpan, “Now action is all we have! (*Ima ya akushon aru nomi!*),” is emblematic of the centrality of this concept of action for the generation of artists who debuted in the later years of the Yomiuri exhibit. In the aftermath of the sudden interruption of the Anpan exhibition in 1963, and still under the social trauma of the defeat of the 1960 Anpo movements, Akasegawa’s call for “action” as a last resort resonated seemed to respond to a twofold sense of loss. Action, and (anti-)art as action, is “all we have” after the debunking of the aesthetic paradigm which grounded the very institution of art and its guaranteed placed in the museum. On the other hand, as Bill Marotti points out, the move to art as action should be also understood as a response to the demands for new modes of political practice. “The artists,” Marotti argues, “struggled to articulate the possibilities of artistic action, art as active and effective political doing – or rather, a political action coming from art – in what amounted to a conceptualization of both a

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<sup>475</sup> Donald Egbert, “The idea of avant-garde in art and politics” in *American Historical Review*, (December 1967), p. 346.

new artistic practice, and a new politics, in the wake of the Anpo defeat.”<sup>476</sup> As defining concepts of postwar art in Japan, *akushon* and its correlate “direct action” (*chokusetsu kōdō*), carried through and through the mark of this fusion of artistic and political practices.

This fusion of art and politics, mediated by the notions of action and the *objet*, corresponded, in some degree, to the fusion of fiction and reality announced by Akasegawa in the transition from painting to three-dimensional art. While being artistic, “action” is out there in the real world of everyday life; yet, even as political action, it remains attached to the realm of fiction and creative experimentation. The interplay between the originally artistic notion of *akushon* and the fundamentally political concept of direct action (*chokusetsu kōdō*) reveals the intricate relationship between artistic and political practices in the context of the 1960s Japanese avant-gardes.

### **From painting to action**

It would be reductive to attribute a single origin to the question of action within postwar artistic discourse in Japan; nonetheless, the term *akushon* can hardly be dissociated from the notion of “action painting.” Most avant-garde artists who embraced the notion of *akushon* as a description of their own innovative artistic practices in 1960s Japan had been educated in the tradition of Western oil painting (*yōga*) and were familiar with the developments of abstract expressionism in Europe and North America. Under such circumstances, it would not be too far-fetched to observe in the notion of *akushon* a radicalization of the idea of “action painting.”

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<sup>476</sup> William A. Marotti, *Politics and Culture in Postwar Japan: Akasegawa Genpei and the Artistic Avant-Garde 1958-1970*. Ph.D. Dissertation (University of Chicago, 2001), p. 148.

through which precisely the painting element becomes superfluous and is ultimately left behind.

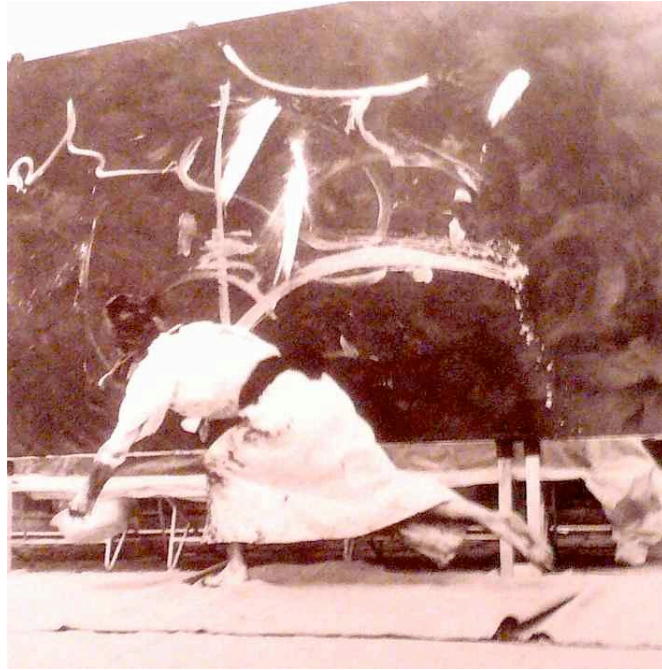


Figure 199. Georges Mathieu, dressed in yukata, demonstrates “action painting” at the Daimaru Department Store, Osaka, September 1957

Neo Dada member Ushio Shinohara’s description of his first encounter with action painting and its role in his subsequent artistic practice is emblematic of this movement from painting to action. The year was 1957, in the aftermath of the groundbreaking exhibition “Art of Today’s World.” Critic Michel Tapié returned to Japan accompanied by the painter Georges Mathieu, who performed a number of highly publicized and well-attended action painting demonstrations in Tokyo and Osaka. In his book of memories, *The Path of the Avant-Garde*, Shinohara narrates his eye-opening encounter with Mathieu’s “samurai action painting” demonstration:

The following year, before we were able to recover from the *Informel* shock, Tapié visited Japan again, this time accompanied by the painter Mathieu, in

order to show Japanese fans what action painting (*akushon peintingu*) was about. (...)

Mathieu appeared in a perfect stage outfit, dressed in yukata, with a red bandana and white tabi, while photographers and onlookers gathered around like a black mountain (...) Holding the tube of paint in the right hand after cracking it open with the mouth, he rushed upon the canvas in a two sword fencing style (*nitōryū*). (...) As Mathieu's movements became increasingly violent, the camera shutters moved like a waterfall. 'That's it!' This must be the real look of a contemporary painter. Hit in full by the setting sun, I walked along the streets, excited by imagining myself in Mathieu's place.<sup>477</sup>

It is worth noticing that nowhere in this description of Mathieu's performance does Shinohara refer to the actual painted canvas. There is absolutely no mention of the resulting work. What seems to count for him is not the painting as a result of action, but solely the action of painting itself, no longer as a private, intimate relationship with the canvas inside the studio, but as full-blown performance (although the term "performance" itself would not be popularized as a genre in contemporary art until a while later) out there in the streets.

Surely, for Mathieu himself, the canvas was still the final result, which was put in a frame, exhibited and sold; the performances played the role of an advertising technique, more than anything else. For Shinohara, on the other hand, it was the public performance-painting that mattered. During the time of the Yomiuri Independent and in its aftermath, Shinohara further developed the action and showmanship aspect of painting practice, whose inspiration he found in the media star image of Mathieu. Still nowadays, seventy-seven years old and living in New York City, Shinohara continues to practice his own blend of painting and fighting techniques called "boxing painting," in which the artist, wearing a complete boxer's attire, hits the canvas with the gloves

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<sup>477</sup> Ushio Shinohara, *Zen'ei no michi* [*The Path of the Avant-Garde*] (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppansha, 1968), pp. 28-30.

dipped in one or many colors of paint. Rather than “action painting,” Shinohara’s method could be more accurately described as a form of *painting as action*.



Figure 200. Ushio Shinohara performs *Boxing Painting*, Tokyo, circa 1960

It is almost impossible to refer to the different moments of the history of action painting, from Pollock’s dripping to Mathieu’s fencing and Shinohara’s boxing, without attending to its ostensible gender bias. To some degree, the outward expression of masculinity in Shinohara’s boxing paintings can be said to exacerbate this gendered aspect of action painting, already conspicuous in Mathieu’s samurai attire and technique. The phallic symbolism of Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings has been recurrently cited,<sup>478</sup> sometimes in relation to the notorious episode of his pissing into Peggy Guggenheim’s fireplace. This gendered aspect of action painting did not escape the witty criticism of Japanese female artists in the 1960s; in a provocative response to its masculine bias, Shigeeko Kubota elaborated the concept and technique

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<sup>478</sup> Cf. Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Boston: M.I.T. Press, 1994).

of “vagina painting.” During a Fluxus event in 1965 New York City, Kubota experimented for the first time with the vagina paintings, which, despite the suggestive name, were performed with a brush attached to her underpants. Midori Yoshimoto comments on the critical stance and implicit references of Kubota’s performance:

Appropriating a horizontal position over the painting surface from the Eastern calligraphy tradition and contemporary action painters, Kubota clearly envisioned her action as a female version of theirs. She also might have conceived it as a parody of the glorified machismo embodied in the actions of male painters, including Jackson Pollock, and Kazuo Shiraga of the Gutai, who painted with his feet as he hung his body from the ceiling.<sup>479</sup>



Figure 201. Shigeko Kubota, *Vagina Painting*, performed during the Perpetual Fluxfest at Cinemateque, New York, July 4, 1965

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<sup>479</sup> Midori Yoshimoto, *Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 179.

Earlier than Shinohara and other Tokyo artists, members of the Ashiya-based Gutai Group had been taking decisive steps towards a conception of artistic practice as *akushon*. During the “Second Gutai Art Exhibition,” Shimamoto Shōzō threw bottles of paint on a horizontally set canvas in front of the national media, on the rooftop of Ohara Kaikan in Tokyo. In the same exhibition, in 1956, instead of painting canvases, Murakami Saburō destroyed a series of 21 screens of framed paper by running through them in front of the public. Yet, it is probably Shiraga Kazuo’s *Challenging Mud*, publicly performed for the first time in July 1955 at Ashiya Park, during the epoch-making “Experimental Outdoor Exhibition to Challenge the Midsummer Burning Sun,” that most cogently exemplifies the radicalization of painting into full-body *akushon*. Shiraga dispensed entirely with canvas, paint and brush, turning his whole body into the instrument of what Haryū described, in relation to *Informel* painting, as a “direct clash between act and matter.”<sup>480</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> Haryū, “Busshitsu to ningen [Matter and Man],” cf. chapter 3.





Figure 202. Shimamoto Shōzō creates a picture by throwing bottles of paint against the canvas at the “Second Gutai Exhibition,” Ohara Kaikan, Tokyo, 1956

Photographed from above, Shiraga’s *Challenging Mud* is strongly reminiscent of an *Informel* canvas, with its heavy, muddy *matière*. Yet, as Hikosaka Naoyoshi puts it, the endpoint, the *telos* of Shiraga’s action does not consist in the finished canvas as in the case of Pollock or Mathieu, but rather in the action itself.<sup>481</sup> In Shiraga’s work, artistic practice does no longer take place in view of the resulting work. Whereas *Informel* painting needed to find support in the “agreement between the traces (*kiseki*) of action (*kōdō*) and the structure of art”<sup>482</sup> (Haryū) inside the canvas, and thereby appropriated the destructive impetus of Dada into the structure of the work of art, this

<sup>481</sup> Cf. Hikosaka Naoyoshi, “Tojirareta enkan no kanata wa – ‘gutai’ no kiseki kara nani wo... [Beyond the Closed Circle – What after the Traces of Gutai?].”

<sup>482</sup> Haryū, “Busshitsu to ningen [Matter and Man],” cf. chapter 3.



new action-based art exploded the limits of painting and, consequently, the very unity of the artwork. From that point, one can say that “action alone is what is left” (*ima ya akushon aru nomi...*); action leaves painting behind and becomes independent as a mode of artistic practice.



Figure 203. Shiraga Kazuo, *Challenging Mud*, 1955

This turn to art as action among Japanese artists since the mid-1950s has been pointed out as a sign of their precedence in the development of what would be later called “performance art.”<sup>483</sup> Yoshimoto Midori comments that “By 1962, what we may call performance art had become ubiquitous in the Japanese avant-garde. While the term *performance art* was not employed until the 1970s, artists were calling their

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<sup>483</sup> Cf. *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979*, exhibition catalogue (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005).

bodily expressions ‘actions’ in those days.”<sup>484</sup> It is also this dislocation of the focus of art from the resulting canvas to the practice or action itself that Hikosaka singles out as the inauguration of Japanese postwar art in 1955: the creative *act* becomes a goal in itself, it is self-teleologized.

Insofar as it turns the creative act into a goal in itself, Shiraga’s *akushon* transforms artistic creation into a mode of *praxis*. Hikosaka’s choice of the term *praxis* to designate what he perceived as the new paradigm of art inaugurated by the Gutai group in 1955 is by no means indifferent to the term’s loaded political connotations. One of the founding members of the early 1970s avant-garde collective Biyoto Revolution Committee, Hikosaka understood *praxis* not merely as the counterpart of creation or *poiesis*, but also as political, revolutionary practice. While the political aspect of *praxis* is not clearly pronounced in the 1973 essay, “Beyond the Closed Circle,” it constitutes a central theme of the texts comprised in the 1974 volume, *Repetition*.<sup>485</sup>

The political character of the artistic avant-garde’s understanding of action was perhaps most sharply expressed in its appropriation of the anarcho-syndicalist expression “direct action” (*chokusetsu kōdō*). The term *chokusetsu kōdō* had been made popular within the Japanese political vocabulary by the Meiji journalist and activist Kōtoku Shusui, a translator of the works of Peter Kropotkin and one of the first to introduce anarchist ideas and political practices in Japan. As Bill Marotti mentions, the debates concerning the political strategy of the 1960s Anpo protests drew heavily upon the discourses of early twentieth century Japanese socialist and

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<sup>484</sup> Yoshimoto, *Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York*, p. 29.

<sup>485</sup> Cf. Hikosaka Naoyoshi, *Hanpuku. Shinkō geijutsu no isō* [*Repetition. Topology of the New Art*].

anarchist movements.<sup>486</sup> On the one hand, it can be said that after its defeat, part of the theoretical impulse that backed up the Anpo movements turned to art as a possible channel for political action; on the other, looked upon from the side of young artists engaged in developing and thinking through new possibilities of art as action, the concept of *chokusetsu kōdō* and its anarcho-syndicalist pedigree seemed to fit perfectly the attempt to think artistic practice as immediate intervention in society.

The first significant appearance of the notion of direct action in Japanese postwar artistic discourse dates from 1962, in the title of a roundtable discussion between a group of young artists concerning their recent action-based practices, published in the art journal *Keishō*.<sup>487</sup> Marotti suggests that the usage of *chokusetsu kōdō* in that context might stem from one of the journal editors, Imaizumi Yoshihiko, who used the same phrase in the title of his own article published in the volume. At any rate, the term was well received and incorporated by the artists themselves in reference to their own works. Years later, Akasegawa turned the notion of direct action into a basic concept to describe the events of his avant-garde collective Hi Red Center; the expression appears in the very subtitle of his volume that narrates the group's history: *Tokyo Mixer Plan. Records of the Hi Red Center's Direct Action*.<sup>488</sup>

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<sup>486</sup> Marotti, *Politics and Culture in Postwar Japan: Akasegawa Genpei and the Artistic Avant-Garde 1958-1970*, pp. 167-8.

<sup>487</sup> Cf. *Keishō*. v. 8, (1962). For a detailed examination of the roundtable discussion cf. Marotti, *Politics and Culture in Postwar Japan: Akasegawa Genpei and the Artistic Avant-Garde 1958-1970*, pp. 148-185.

<sup>488</sup> Akasegawa Genpei, *Tokyo Mikisā Keikaku [Tokyo Mixer Plan]* (Tokyo: Chikuma Bunko, 1984).



Figure 204. Cover of *Keishō No. 8 Reports of Direct Action (Chokusetsu kōdō no hōkoku)*, 1962

The period comprised between the defeat of the first Anpo movements in 1960 and the second round of Anpo protests (and their subsequent defeat) and Expo Osaka '70 was a time of porous borders and blurred limits between political and artistic practice for the Japanese left. Not only did art become increasingly politicized, but also political movements appealed to originally artistic concepts and techniques in their practices. A strong reaction against this blurring of the limits between art and politics is expressed in the novelist and right-wing agitator Yukio Mishima's comment on the strategy of the 1968 Zenkyōtō occupation of the Tokyo University Campus. Mishima saw the students' strategy as totally innocuous as political practice, yet fascinatingly sophisticated in its relationship to the realm of art. Mishima writes in the

comments to his historical debate with members of the Tokyo University Zenkyōtō movement in 1969:

The students are aware that the idea of this space, which cannot be sustained for longer than an instant is the proof of the conceptual sophistication of their acts, without which those would have absolutely no value. They are also aware that the establishment [of this liberated zone] does not possess any efficacy as a revolutionary strategy. The conceptual sophistication expressed in this exclusion of all pretension to efficacy and temporal continuity implies necessarily an affirmation of art.<sup>489</sup>

What Mishima refuses to grant in this observation is precisely the impossibility of objectively identifying a separation between art and politics as realms of revolutionary action.

To be sure, the impossibility of clear delimitation of the boundaries between art and politics should not be taken as the complete identification of the two realms. Paraphrasing Miyakawa, one can say that although any form of artistic practice could become political, it does not follow that all art was political per se. Avant-garde art collectives in the 1960s were keen on appropriating the jargon, theories and techniques of political activism in a number of different ways. Nonetheless, it is possible to discern within the plethora of their ideas and actions, the patterns of a specific mode of political intervention through art.

### **Tickling the Establishment**

The anarcho-syndicalist conception of “direct action,” exemplified in the idea of the “general strike,” relies on the possibility of causing full collapse of the wage labor system, and thereby of the state and of capitalism itself. Direct action, in this

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<sup>489</sup> Yukio Mishima & Tōdai Zenkyōtō, *Bi to kyōdōtai to tōdai tōsō* [Beauty, Community and the Struggle at Tokyo University] (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 2000), p. 138.

sense, is conceived in opposition to action through conventional political channels, such as participation in the processes of representative democracy. Avant-garde artists in the early 1960s perceived in this call for directness and immediacy an alternative, not only to the mechanisms of representative politics, but also to representation as an aesthetic category and its mediatory role in conventional forms of political art. However, in contrast to the outward confrontational attitude, clear goals and objective strategies of their anarcho-syndicalist predecessors, the “direct actions” of 1960s artists were far less clear about their strategies and political goals. In fact, the political stances and statements of avant-garde art groups and individual artists were oftentimes so ambiguous and elusive that one might wonder whether it is not a foolish pursuit to locate in their works any sort of politicality.

I do not intend to provide a final, reassuring answer to this question. In fact, any sort of definitive *proof* of the political relevance of their actions would be rather self-defeating in regard to their methods. What I intend to demonstrate is simply the extent to which a *possibility* of political intervention through art takes shape in their artistic practices, which is fundamentally different from the ways in which the politicality of art had been thought from the perspective of aesthetic contemplation.

This characteristic mode of political intervention is what Akasegawa once sharply described as a strategy of “tickling” the political establishment. In a 2006 interview, as I mentioned the difficulty to pinpoint the politicality (*seijisei*) of certain Hi Red Center events, such as the 1964 Ginza Cleaning, Akasegawa enthusiastically replied that, certainly, those events “do relate to politics, they touch upon it, although not as an attempt to overthrow something; they touch upon it by tickling (*chiku chiku tokoro wo fureteiru*).”<sup>490</sup> Akasegawa’s wittily concrete notion of “tickling” captures a

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<sup>490</sup> Akasegawa Genpei, Personal interview. 10 Nov. 2006.

key aspect not only of his own approach to politics, but of a number of the emerging forms of political art in the 1960s.

Shortly after the *Keishō* journal debates on “direct action,” Akasegawa joined Nakanishi Natsuyuki and Takamatsu Jirō to form the avant-garde art group that came to be called Hi Red Center – a name which, in spite of its mischievously Marxist undertone, stood for the English translation of the first characters of each of their family names: Taka = Hi; Aka = Red; Naka = Center. Their last activity together, during the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, whose political importance in postwar Japan should not be overlooked, came to be known as *Cleaning Event*. “The games themselves were over,” Akasegawa recalls, “but before that, for quite a few months, all around Tokyo people’s heads were full with Olympics.”<sup>491</sup> The government was extremely careful about removing garbage, cleaning up the streets, planting flowers, in a concerted effort of urban beautification in order to showcase a rapidly modernizing capitalist Japan. Hi Red Center’s *Cleaning Event* sharply captured this equation of accomplished capitalist modernity and sterilization of the urban environment that marked the preparation for the 1964 Olympics; dressed in white uniforms and equipped with facemasks and toothbrushes, the group’s members painstakingly scrubbed the concrete tiles of the busy sidewalks of Ginza in downtown Tokyo.

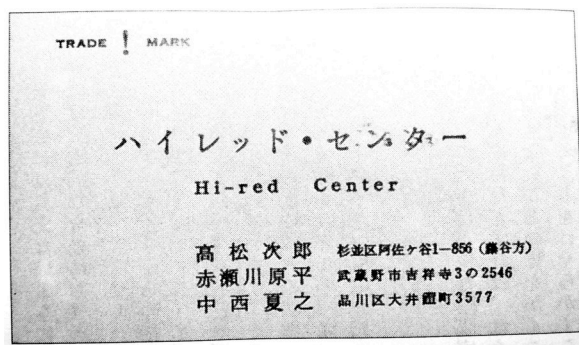


Figure 205. Hi Red Center, *Business Card*, 1962

<sup>491</sup> Akasegawa Genpei, *Tokyo Mikisā Keikaku [Tokyo Mixer Plan]*, p. 250.

Despite the intentionally absurd character of their cleaning methods and tools, it was necessary to keep a certain official aura to the whole event. Most of all, it was important to keep secrecy about the artistic identity of their actions. Passers-by were not supposed to realize immediately the actual character of their performance. For that purpose, Akasegawa himself, who held a part-time job producing letterings and posters, confectioned an official-looking sign with the inscription “Cleaning in Progress” (*sōji-chū*) which contributed to the ambiguity of the scene.

According to Akasegawa, it was the instant in which passers-by noticed the unusualness of the group’s actions and stopped to observe it, trying to figure out what exactly was going on but not yet realizing that the action they witnessed was actually an artistic event, which constituted the decisive moment of the whole performance. At that exact moment, and only then, the public experienced art in its real, raw state (*nama no geijutsu*). The construction of this sort of situation was for him the essence of the Hi Red Center’s events, which he described as the attempt to perform “secret art” (*himitsu geijutsu*).<sup>492</sup>

The art exhibited in museums and galleries can only be seen by spectators (*kankyaku*). The passers-by, the station attendant, are unable to see it. If a station attendant hears that there is art in a certain museum, and he goes all the way to see it, he will immediately turn into a spectator. The same happens to the policeman, or to the man in the streets. As soon as they take their first step into the exhibition hall, they become spectators.<sup>493</sup>

The group’s attempt of doing art “in secret” is thus explained as a technique to prevent its witnesses from taking the position of spectators, that is, to assume a contemplative attitude towards the artwork.

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<sup>492</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>493</sup> Ibid., p. 13.





Figure 206. Hi Red Center, *Cleaning Event*, Ginza, Tokyo, 1964

The contemplative attitude of the spectator, which is automatically evoked by the very concept of art, spoils the whole artistic experience. The simple naming of something as “art,” the revelation and labeling of this fragile and secret activity is sufficient to spoil its authentic content. “Art is a very difficult word,” Akasegawa writes, “In a way, it is just like canned food. Once you cut it open, its artistic content starts to spoil.”<sup>494</sup> And this is why, he claims, “Hi Red Center used lying as a preservative. In the early 1960s the group went around the city of Tokyo, saying ‘this is not art!’ ‘this is not art!’ but actually doing art. Just because once art would be

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<sup>494</sup> Ibid.

exposed out there in the open, it would start to spoil.”<sup>495</sup> Because the very name “art” seems to call for a specific mode of being of the object and a certain subjective attitude, required in order to properly perceive and appreciate it, which hindered the fundamental experience the group attempted to provoke.

Like Hélio Oiticica, Akasegawa emphasized the importance of taking art away from its position as an object of contemplation. To do so, it was not sufficient to take it outside the frame, the museum, and into the space of everyday life in the streets; it was necessary to strip it of its very identity as art, to provide it the secrecy that prevented the spectator from grasping it as “art.” It is precisely this secrecy that both Akasegawa and Miyakawa referred to in the 1960s as (anti-)art’s “namelessness” (*mumeisei*).<sup>496</sup> If art would be ever able to exist in full, Miyakawa argues, “it is questionable whether we would still be able to call it art (*geijutsu*) or fine art (*bijutsu*). Perhaps what will be there is nothing other than a nameless space (*mumei-na kūkan*).”<sup>497</sup> Only stripped of its name, as a nameless presence, can art exist within the realm of everyday life; only so can artistic practice possibly attain the ticklish effect Akasegawa talks about.

While Hi Red Center attempted to tickle the political establishment, the Nagoya-based avant-garde collective Zero Dimension (*Zero jigen*) rubbed the state a little harder with its brand of “art terrorism.” Famous for its naked “rituals” in the streets of Japan’s metropolitan centers, and for its sabotage acts against Expo ’70 in Osaka, Zero Dimension targeted public morality, state power and the art establishment more directly than any other Japanese art group at the time. In 2006, sitting in his

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<sup>495</sup> Ibid., p. 13-14.

<sup>496</sup> Cf. Akasegawa Genpei “Shizan shita nise-satsu [The miscarried fake note]” in *Objet wo motta musansha* [An objet-carrying Proletarian], pp. 184-5; Miyakawa Atsushi, “Hangeijutsu ikō [After Anti-Art].”

<sup>497</sup> Miyakawa, “Hangeijutsu ikō [After Anti-Art],” p. 119.

apartment in the outskirts of Tokyo, surrounded by the paintings that now serve as background for Zero Jigen performances in avant-garde theaters in Tokyo and Brooklyn, Katō Yoshihiro, the group's leader, talked about his views of avant-garde practice as a mode of cultural terrorism. "Some times democracy can develop into a tool for oppression. ... One has to develop different forms of cultural terrorism,"<sup>498</sup> he argued, as we looked at the mural-size paintings of naked men and women walking around in gas masks in the middle of an urban landscape. "In the 1960s, we would get forty people together, put on those masks and run the stretch between Kinokuniya [bookstore] and Isetan [department store] in Shinjuku,"<sup>499</sup> he recalled.



Figure 207. Zero Jigen, *Anti-Osaka Expo '70 Demonstration* [banner inscriptions read “*waisetsu butsu* (obscene thing)”]

<sup>498</sup> Katō Yoshihiro, Personal interview. 30 Nov. 2006.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid.

Katō explained that during some of the group's events, expecting the inevitable police intervention, they organized a scheme in which some of the group's members would come disguised as high-ranking policemen and surround the group, until the real police discovered the plot and put everybody in jail. This particular strategy seems to have left a strong mark in the records of 1960s art in Japan. Lee Ufan, whose own artistic practices could hardly be more different from Zero Dimension, narrated the same episode with sympathetic enthusiasm. Lee was particularly keen on the Surrealistic idea of the prison cell filled with high-ranking policemen behind the bars, guarded by the low-ranking sentinels outside. He remembered this sort of suggestive subversion of the aestheticized hierarchies of the police force as characteristic of the political attitude of the 1960s avant-gardes in Tokyo.<sup>500</sup>



Figure 208. Zero Jigen, *March against the Vietnam War*, Shinjuku, Tokyo, 1967

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<sup>500</sup> Lee Ufan, Personal interview. 15 Aug. 2006.

For Zero Jigen, with its masks, helmets and uniforms, as for Neo Dada and Hi Red Center, the performative aspect of this new type of art was intimately connected to the usage of *objets*, as well as to the attempt to bring art outside the museum and into the streets, where it could be encountered not by spectators, but by people in their everyday occupations. Katō's answer to my question about the beginning of Zero Dimension's performances evokes this recurrent thematic: "Because people don't usually go to museums, paintings are pretty lonely inside the museum. So we would carry around our paintings on our backs through the streets; that's how our performances started. It was like an *objet*."<sup>501</sup> It is difficult to estimate the extent to which such recurrent themes in different artists' recollections of their theoretical stances and the development of their art during the 1960s might be a product of the blurring of different narratives over the course of almost half a century. Yet, rather than authorship and precise dates, it is the emergence of certain discursive trends concerning the position of art in society and its potential relationship to politics that interests here.

Liberated from the physical frame of canvas painting, and from the immaterial frame of its artistic identity, (anti-)art, in Akasegawa's saying, exploded and fused the limits between fiction and the real world. In doing so, art was able to tackle (or tickle) the fictional, aestheticized character of the political establishment itself, to challenge a certain monopoly of the aesthetics and fiction of everyday life on which the modern state grounds its power. In this sense, it is hardly surprising that such forms of art should face immediate retaliation from the part of state power and its policing apparatus. Yet, given that the political implications of this art, in contrast to something like socialist realist painting for instance, are not readily apparent and exposed and were occasionally unclear even for its creators, frequently it was the state's steadfast

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<sup>501</sup> Katō Yoshihiro, Personal interview. 30 Nov. 2006.

reaction that confirmed or sanctioned its politicality. Within the realm of 1960s avant-garde art in Japan, the case of Akasegawa's trial for producing and distributing a copy of a 1,000 Yen bill exemplifies the state's revealing response to the ticklish effect of the *objet*.

### **The Platonic Model: Art in the Trap of Theory**

January 1963, Akasegawa ordered three hundred photomechanic copies of the face side of a 1,000-Yen note at a Tokyo print shop, which he mailed as the invitation to his solo exhibition at the Shinjuku Daiichi Gallery using the Japanese Post Office's cash mailers. Earlier that year he claims to have been "masochistically working"<sup>502</sup> on a painted version of the same 1,000-Yen note magnified approximately one hundred times. However, realizing the importance of multiplicity and mechanical reproducibility for the very essence of paper money, without which it was "still just canvas painting," the artist resorted to the outsourced labor of the print shop.<sup>503</sup>

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<sup>502</sup> Akasegawa Genpei, Personal interview. 10 Nov. 2006.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid.

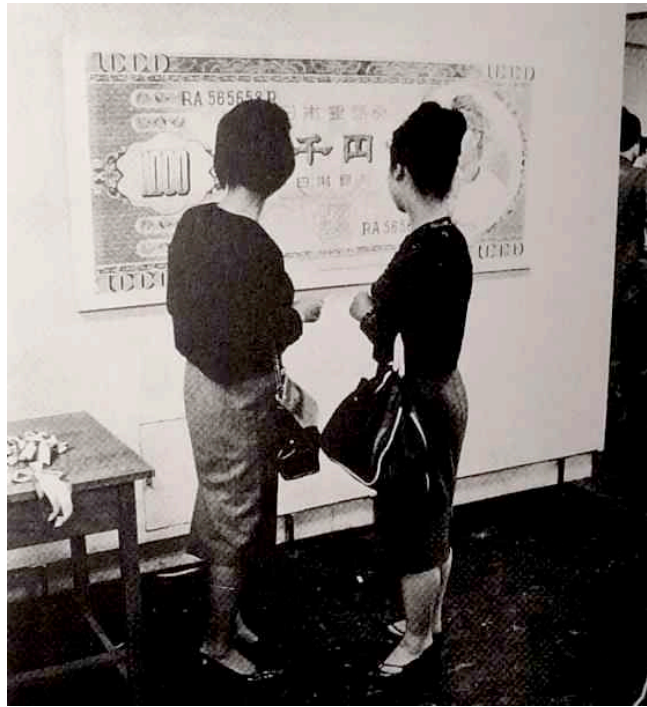


Figure 209. Akasegawa Genpei, *Enlarged 1,000-Yen Note* in exhibition at Shinjuku Daiichi Gallery, Tokyo, 1963

A year later Akasegawa received a first visit by a Tokyo Metropolitan Police officer questioning him about the copies. The one-sided, monochromatic copies of the 1,000-Yen note being insufficient to prove him guilty of counterfeit, the artist was indicted under an old, ambiguous imperial law controlling the “imitation of currency and securities.”<sup>504</sup> Accused of “threatening society’s confidence in paper currency,”<sup>505</sup> Akasegawa faced public trial eleven times between 1965 and 1967, and was finally sentenced to 3 months of imprisonment at hard labor, after rejection of the defense’s last appeal to the Supreme Court in April 1970.

Akasegawa’s trial and, more broadly speaking, what has come to be known as the *Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident*, became one of the most important events of 1960s

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<sup>504</sup> Cf. Akasegawa Genpei. “Saishū iken chinjutsu [Final Statement]” in *Objet wo motta musansha (An objet-carrying Proletarian)*, pp. 118-144; English translation: “Final Statement” in *Concerned Theater Japan*, v. 1, n. 3 (Autumn 1970), pp. 36-43.

<sup>505</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

avant-garde art in Japan; an unexpected occasion of spontaneous interaction between the artist and the public as “participator” (Oiticica). As somehow suggested by Akasegawa in his final court statement and explicitly formulated by Reiko Tomii, *Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident* can be analyzed as a multilayered collaborative artwork:

In this sense *Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident* is not an isolated object made by a solitary creator. Akasegawa’s money was at the core of *Incident*, in what Duchamp called the ‘raw state’; the body of this work consists of the first set of readings – interpretations and decipherings – produced at the time by Akasegawa and other parties immediately involved (fellow artists and critics, the general press, the interested public, etc.).<sup>506</sup>

Akasegawa acknowledges that his theoretical writings on the *objet* and on the relationship between art and the state would most likely never come to light, if it were not for the unexpected intervention of the police in his artistic experimentations with paper money. In contrast to Oiticica, for whom the impulse to theorize accompanied from the outset the process of visual and plastic experimentation, Akasegawa relates that it was the need to explain his artistic procedure to the police that first prompted him to explicitly reflect on the meaning and purposes of his own artistic experiments, as well as of art (and anti-art) as such. Queried about the relationship between the trial and the beginning of his theoretical reflections on art, Akasegawa commented:

If the Metropolitan Police Department had not called on me, I might have never thought about all that; but when you are dealing with the police, there’s no way around it, you have to answer. With other people you could just say ‘This time I made a 1,000 note artwork’ and they will say ‘Oh, interesting!’ We understand each other through some kind of feeling (*kankaku de otagai no koto wo wakaru*). But that doesn’t work with the police. You have to explain it

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<sup>506</sup> Reiko Tomii, “State v. (Anti-) Art: Model 1,000-Yen Note Incident by Akasegawa Genpei and Company” in *Positions* n. 10 v. 1 (Spring 2002), p. 145.



all very clearly. So, for the first time, I thought to myself: how can I explain this?<sup>507</sup>

The state's unyielding demand for theorization deals a deadly blow to the namelessness of art, which Akasegawa strived so hard to protect; against the elusive secrecy of (anti-)art, the state responds by trapping it under the light of theory. In order to acquit the artist from criminal charges, the strategy of Akasegawa's defense consisted in demonstrating that *Model 1,000-Yen Note* was, in fact, an art object, and therefore protected by the right to freedom of expression. In order to prove that his act of money copying was not a crime, they sought to demonstrate that it was a form of art. For this purpose, artists and critics transformed the Tokyo Metropolitan Police courtroom into a lecture hall and temporary exhibition space for the most radical experiments in contemporary art. However, by revealing the artistic identity of his *Model*, Akasegawa argues, the defense destroyed its fundamental namelessness, making it well-known (*yūmei*), as opposed to nameless (*mumei*).<sup>508</sup> Taking into account art's intrinsically dangerous nature in regard to state power, Sawaragi Noi argued in his analysis of Akasegawa's trial that rather than proving that *Model 1,000-Yen Note* "is art and therefore it is not a crime" a more adequate argument would be that "in spite of being art, it is nonetheless not crime."<sup>509</sup> Yet, how does Akasegawa's model present such a threat to the state? Why are the police so concerned about this reproduction of a banknote, which doesn't even qualify as fake money? Finally, what is the role of "theory" in this vexed relationship between art and the state?

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<sup>507</sup> Akasegawa Genpei, Personal interview. 10 Nov. 2006.

<sup>508</sup> Cf. Akasegawa Genpei, "Shizan shita nise-satsu [The miscarried fake note]," p. 185.

<sup>509</sup> Sawaragi Noi, *Nihon. Gendai. Bijutsu [Japan, Contemporary, Art]*, pp.199-230.

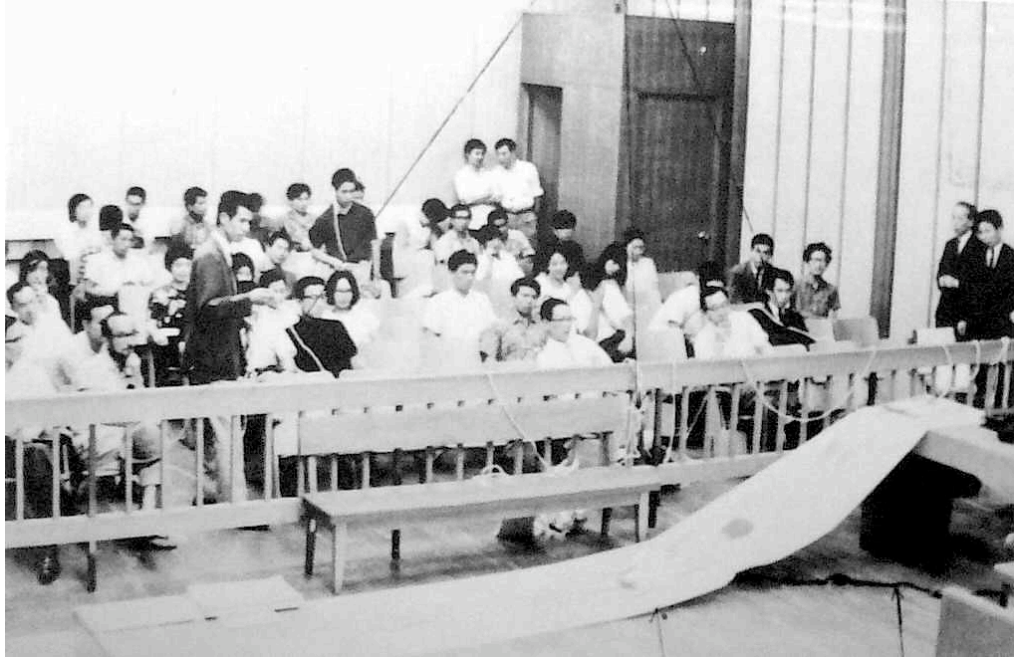


Figure 210. *1,000-Yen Note Trial*, Takamatsu Jirō presents *String Event* at Tokyo Metropolitan Police Courtroom, 1967

In a text whose title “Typography” is not entirely foreign to the context of Akasegawa’s money copying, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe addresses Heidegger’s interpretation of the Platonic exclusion of the mimetic artist from the political sphere. The question revolves around the determination of the importance and nature of the *threat* presented by art, and more precisely by mimetic art, to the political establishment. For Lacoue-Labarthe himself, as for Plato and Heidegger, it is a matter of the relationship between art (determined as *mimesis*), truth and politics. The question of mimesis is posed as a political question, and even as the central question of politics. In Lacoue-Labarthe’s words:

If we are to believe Socrates (or ‘Socrates’) this expulsion [of the mimetic artist from the realm of the *polis*] would manifestly be the most decisive gesture as regards the “foundation of the State,” [and here the reference to Heidegger’s vocabulary – its displacement into the Platonic context – should

not pass unnoticed] the gesture upon which the uprightness of such a foundation would essentially depend.<sup>510</sup>

For Heidegger, this fundamental political question (albeit the meaning of “politics” itself indefinitely suspended or bracketed) is posed in terms of a *dispute* between art and truth, Nietzsche vs. Plato: “Nietzsche says that art is worth more than truth. It must be that Plato decides that art is worth less than truth, that is, less than knowledge of true being as philosophy.”<sup>511</sup> Opposed to philosophical knowledge of truth, art is depicted in this context as inherently tied and limited to the sensuous realm. “Artistic configuration and portrayal are grounded essentially in the realm of the sensuous. Art is affirmation of the sensuous. According to the doctrine of Platonism, however, the supersensuous is affirmed as genuine being.”<sup>512</sup> And since “the basic modes of behavior that sustain and define the community should be grounded in essential knowledge” of truth, it is precisely this supersensuous sphere of true being, as essential ground of the state, what should be politically preserved from the threat of mimesis – mimesis, which Heidegger describes as “the ‘making-after,’ *das Nachmachen*, that is, *dar-stellen* (show, depict, represent) and *her-stellen* (produce) something in a manner that is typical of something else,” or, as in Lacoue-Labarthe’s curious translation of this passage, “counterfeiting.”<sup>513</sup>

The fundamental political threat of mimesis is described by Plato as a “corruption of judgment [*dianoia*] of all listeners who do not possess as an antidote [*pharmakon*] a knowledge [*eidenai*] of things as they are.”<sup>514</sup> Naturally, the “only remedy for such a mutilation of *dianoia* (in this case, for this *anoia*, this *de-mentia*

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<sup>510</sup> Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: mimesis, philosophy, politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 99.

<sup>511</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche I* (Pfullingen: Verlag Gunther Neske, 1961), p. 163.

<sup>512</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>513</sup> Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: mimesis, philosophy, politics*, p. 77-8.

<sup>514</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

provoked by mimesis)” is nothing less than “ontological contemplation, that is, theory.”<sup>515</sup> Theory, as ontological knowledge of the supersensuous truth, emerges as essentially opposed to art as mimesis, whose very mode of being is intrinsically tied to an affirmation of the sensuous. Moreover, this kind of theoretical knowledge of truth is at the same time the revelation of mimesis as mimesis, that is, its delimitation and naming. “Hence, the oldest and most constant gesture vis-à-vis mimesis, which is the attempt to circumscribe it “theoretically,” to put it on stage and theatricalize it in order to try to catch it in the trap of (in)sight.”<sup>516</sup>

When confronted to the State’s demand for explanation, Akasegawa claimed, “there is no way around it,” “you have to explain it all very clearly.”<sup>517</sup> And his conceptualization of the *Model 1,000-Yen Note* sets off precisely as an attempt to respond to the state’s gesture that seeks to reveal and delimit his mimetic activity: if it is not a crime, it must be art.

### **Art as Theory**

Yet, the brilliance of Akasegawa’s response consists in turning the same theoretical weapon against the state’s own fictional apparatus. While explaining and revealing his own mimetic act, he exposes and analyzes the essence of paper currency itself. Because the essence of *Model 1,000 Note* is precisely to mimic the state’s fictional machine, the revelation of its mechanism, its theory, is at the same time a theory of the state’s monopoly of fiction. In *Model 1,000 Note Incident* what is at stake is, clearly and rather literally, a matter of mimesis and, once again, of its

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<sup>515</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid.

<sup>517</sup> Akasegawa Genpei, Personal interview. 10 Nov. 2006.

problematic relationship to the state. However, it is the role of art and its relationship to theory that acquire an entirely different twist.

As Lacoue-Labarthe points out, thus casting a shadow of doubt upon Heidegger's confident reading of Plato's political theory, the threat of mimesis seems all the more imminent as truth (*aletheia*) can never reveal itself as such, "because *aletheia* does not resemble and cannot resemble itself."<sup>518</sup> And therefore, as we are finally led to suspect, "nothing in fact more resembles mimesis than *aletheia*. Or, if you prefer, and because this translation imposes itself somewhat in our classical memory, nothing more resembles truth than the veri-similar, verisimilitude."<sup>519</sup> But, then, what does it mean "to resemble," in this context in which what is at stake is precisely the semblance of resemblance itself? Politically speaking the problem is not a minor one; Lacoue-Labarthe is careful to leave it open, undecided. But it is precisely this vacuum of the unrecognizability of truth, emptied out through the expulsion of art, "upon which the political 'system' would be organized,"<sup>520</sup> the site in which something like a political monopoly of fiction can take place. In other words, if truth does not resemble and cannot resemble itself, how to tell it apart from what could be called an established monopoly of the right to mimesis? Perhaps, all in all, it amounts to nothing other than a matter of confidence.

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<sup>518</sup> Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: mimesis, philosophy, politics*, p. 118.

<sup>519</sup> Ibid.

<sup>520</sup> Ibid., p. 99.



Figure 211. 1,000-Yen Note Trial, Catalogue of Seized Works, 1967

Accused of threatening “society’s confidence in paper currency,” Akasegawa defended himself by claiming that his copy of the 1,000-Yen note “does not endanger society’s confidence”; it demonstrates, rather, “that the relationship between us and our currency is mediated by confidence built on custom alone, and it attempts to analyze this fact.”<sup>521</sup> Model 1,000-Yen Note is, according to him, “an indispensable tool today in considering such phenomena as ‘confidence’...”<sup>522</sup> It is hence in this case mimesis, or for that matter, his copy of the so-called “original” note produced by the government’s mint, that introduces an analytical, theoretical stance towards the reality of paper currency itself and the phenomenon of society’s confidence in it.

<sup>521</sup> Akasegawa Genpei, “Final Statement,” p. 41.

<sup>522</sup> Ibid. p. 40.

According to Akasegawa, this theoretical potential of art is concentrated precisely in this entity we call, after Duchamp and the Surrealists, the *objet*. In an essay written months after his last public trial, suggestively entitled *The Objet after Stalin*, Akasegawa writes: “The first time the name *objet* was attached to an ordinary thing around us was not in a courtroom, but in what could be called the courtroom-like space of the museum. And the criminal who, in 1917, took a urinal into a museum in New York City was, needless to say, Marcel Duchamp.”<sup>523</sup> And, as he humorously comments in his final statement in court:

Needless to say, this created something of a scandal at the time. But was the world’s confidence in urinals shaken? Or was there any fear that its confidence would be endangered? There are no records, for instance, indicating that all elimination of liquid wastes over toilets stopped, that people turned to other expedients, such as making their water against the trunk of trees, or that all toilets were dismantled.<sup>524</sup>



Figure 212. Richard Mutt (Marcel Duchamp), *Fountain*, 1917

<sup>523</sup> Akasegawa Genpei, “Stalin ikō no obuie [The *objet* after Stalin]” in *Obuje wo motta musansha (An objet-carrying proletarian)*, p. 69.

<sup>524</sup> Akasegawa Genpei, “Final Statement,” p. 40.

In the same way as men continue to urinate into the urinal, “just as we used to do before Duchamp,” there should be no reason for people to stop relating to paper currency as they have been doing for a long time, simply because the basis of our relationship to it has been analyzed, that is, theoretically exposed. Unless, of course (but this could not be stated in court) the mode of our relationship with money is particularly sensitive and fragile in respect to theoretical analysis, as another provocative comparison raised by Akasegawa a couple of months away from court seems to suggest:

Speaking of something whose memory is awoken by the idea of a model: just like the Emperor’s picture hanging over the Shinto altars of our families’ homes during the sacred war, what’s the danger in hanging high on the wall a model of the original 1,000-Yen note, whose reality is so difficult to preserve?  
<sup>525</sup>

As the production of what he refers to as a “cognitive form” (*ninshiki no katachi*) called *objet*, art, Akasegawa claims, “exists only within the realm of [our] round skull.” Its connection to sensuous reality is due mainly to the fact that “the skull too is part of the body,” and therefore also thoughts and images “require physical strength.”<sup>526</sup> Moreover, to reveal and “expose these images for what they are, or to expose the real, physical shape of things obscured by a screen of illusions, is one of the directions in which contemporary art is moving.”<sup>527</sup> In contrast to the allegedly Platonic notion of an affirmation of the sensuous, Akasegawa describes contemporary art as a fundamentally theoretical activity, in which precisely our ordinary relationship to the senses becomes a primary object of investigation.

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<sup>525</sup> Akasegawa Genpei, “Stalin ikō no obuje [The *objet* after Stalin],” p. 72.

<sup>526</sup> Akasegawa Genpei, “Final Statement,” p. 38.

<sup>527</sup> Ibid.



More than actual counterfeit, the state fears this *objet*, which theorizes the mechanism of its own monopoly of the right to fiction. *Model 1,000-Yen Note* tickles the state because state power is fundamentally grounded on the same blurred region between fiction and the real world, which constitutes the realm of art. Akasegawa describes the reality of paper currency as “an agreed upon illusion,”<sup>528</sup> a merely fictional, sensuous reality, like “the agreement between the darkness of the theater and ourselves, according to which we must identify the reproduced reality, which the shades of light and dark on the film try to express through cinematic imagery, with the full-blooded reality that lies outside the theater.”<sup>529</sup> The fact that, under the spell of this illusion, “we continue to use that paper as money is the same as shedding tears over shadows projected on a screen.”<sup>530</sup> The difference lies, however, in that “movies exist only in the movie theater. In a lighted movie house, deprived of its darkness, the screen appears for what it is.” Yet, as far as paper money is concerned, “there is no single switch that will remove the surrounding darkness, for it inhabits every corner of our daily lives.”<sup>531</sup> Like art outside the canvas frame, paper money “fuses fiction and the real world.” Hence, the necessity and function of an object such as the *Model 1,000-Yen Note*: Akasegawa’s artistic, mimetological, yet theoretical *pharmakon* against the established monopoly of fiction.

Elaborating on an expression coined by Hubert Damisch, Mieke Bal proposes to describe certain works of art as “theoretical objects.” A theoretical object, she explains, is a “theoretically strong work of art (one that proposes its own theory) [and] has something to contribute to the way we look at art – at this particular piece, at

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<sup>528</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>529</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>530</sup> Ibid.

<sup>531</sup> Ibid.

others ‘like it’, at art in general.”<sup>532</sup> Insofar as it possesses its own theory, and thus “contributes” to our ways of looking at other objects – to our *dianoia* – Akasegawa’s *Model 1,000-Yen Note* impeccably exemplifies Bal’s notion of the “theoretical object.” Yet, the theoretical strength of Akasegawa’s *Model* does not refer exclusively, not even primarily, to “art in general.” In fact, *Model 1,000-Yen Note* contributes, most of all, to our ways of looking at and relating to another object, which is just “like it,” namely paper money itself. In Akasegawa’s theoretical *objet*, what is at stake is not a “theory of art”; on the contrary, the elaboration of such a theory, the attempt to circumscribe it within a clear and safe frame, would conform precisely to the will of the state. The tickling potential of Akasegawa’s *Model* consists precisely in inverting the theoretical relationship, in turning the monetary system itself, and thereby the state power that sustains it, into an object of theoretical analysis.

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<sup>532</sup> Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois’ Spider: the architecture of art writing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. xiv.

## EPILOGUE



Figure 213. Allan Kaprow, *Household*, women licking jam off of a car, Ithaca City Dump, Ithaca, NY, 1964, Photo by Sol Goldberg

The pursuit of immediate, unframed action in artistic practice was by no means a particular trait of the Brazilian and Japanese avant-gardes in the 1960s. Allan Kaprow wrote in 1964 that in face of the contemporary situation of art “all that is left to do is to act.”<sup>533</sup> The similarity with Akasegawa’s formulation, “now action is all that is left (*ima ya akushon aru nomi*)”<sup>534</sup> is neither coincidental nor explainable in terms of mere copying or “influence.” That same year, in one of Kaprow’s most well

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<sup>533</sup> Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. Expanded Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 47.

<sup>534</sup> Cf. Akasegawa, *Ima ya akushon aru nomi!* “Yomiuri Andepandan” to iu genshō [Now Action is all that is left! The “Yomiuri Independent” Phenomenon].

known Happenings, a group of Cornell University students staged a sexually charged performance amidst the urban junk and bleak countryside scenery of the Ithaca City Dump. In retrospect, Kaprow's *Household* seems to resonate with the early sixties Civil Rights Movement and foreshadow the campus battles and feminist struggles of the years that followed. Like Akasegawa, Kaprow dreamt of a Happening in which the line that separates art from daily life was "kept as fluid and perhaps indistinct as possible"<sup>535</sup>; he, too, plotted the abolition of the contemplative attitude to the work of art:

Happenings are an active art, requiring that creation and realization, artwork and appreciator, artwork and life be inseparable. Like Action Painting, from which they have derived inspiration, they will probably appeal to those who find the contemplative life by itself inadequate.<sup>536</sup>

In search of immediate modes of social insertion, the postwar avant-gardes ruptured the frame of canvas painting and the immaterial frame of institutionalized art. In their attempts to blur the borders between fiction and real life, a young generation of artists circa 1960 brought artistic action outside the canvas and into the realm of the everyday. By conceiving of the spectator no longer as a receptor of stimuli, but rather as an active, participating subject, they renounced the politics of abstraction and attempted to redefine the politicality of art. Beneath local specificities and superficial coincidences, the fundamental contemporaneity between their widely diverse artistic practices and theories consists precisely in this shared pursuit of different modes of political action beyond the aesthetic regime of art.

Yet, unnamed and unframed within the space of everyday life, art does not last longer than a fleeting moment; "like canned food," once you cut it open, it starts to

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<sup>535</sup> Kaprow, op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>536</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

spoil.<sup>537</sup> The “sixties” are ephemeral, but not because the radical experiments in art and politics of the 1960s were unable to consolidate some lasting form of social transformation. Rather, within the realm of artistic practices and theories, the “sixties” are ephemeral primarily because of the experience of time which they represent, the time of a fleeting moment of liberation between the frame of art and everyday life. In art and politics, the repeated experience of this unsustainable liberation, what Mário Pedrosa paradigmatically termed an “experimental exercise of freedom,”<sup>538</sup> is one of the crucial legacies of the sixties generation.

In April 1970, the *Model 1,000-Yen Note* trial ended; Akasegawa was ultimately convicted, but his sentence suspended on a probationary basis by the Supreme Court. Without entirely abandoning the field of contemporary art, Akasegawa moved towards fiction writing as a main career, and was awarded the prestigious Akutagawa Prize in 1981 for his short story “My Father Vanished (*Chichi ga kieta*).”<sup>539</sup> To my question concerning his current perspective on his artistic practices in the 1960s, Akasegawa claimed in 2006 that, although doing art in the way he used to at that time seemed to have lost its meaning, it was still the same impetus that guided his current works and interventions.<sup>540</sup>

Starting circa 1970, Lygia Clark gradually shifted the focus of her experiments with relationality away from the realm of institutionalized art. Her dislocation of artistic research into different institutional realms, initiated during her experimental workshops at the Sorbonne in 1972, acquired clearer contours following her return to

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<sup>537</sup> Akasegawa, *Tokyo Mikisā Keikaku* [*Tokyo Mixer Plan*], p. 13.

<sup>538</sup> Pedrosa repeated this expression in different occasions in the late 1960s and early 1970s. See for instance Mário Pedrosa, “Por dentro e por fora das bienais [Inside and Outside of the Biennales]” in *Mundo, Homem, Arte em Crise* [*Man, World, Art in Crisis*] (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1975), p. 308.

<sup>539</sup> Akasegawa Genpei, *Chichi ga kieta* [*My Father Vanished*] (Tokyo: Bungei-shunju, 1986).

<sup>540</sup> Akasegawa Genpei, Personal interview. 6 Nov. 2006.

Rio in 1976. Clark turned her “relational objects” into the tools of a new form of therapeutic practice, which she called “Structuration of the Self (*Estruturação do Self*).” From 1977 until her death in 1988, her activities in the official artistic circuit were limited to retrospective exhibitions and recuperation of previous works. As Suely Rolnik accurately emphasized, “it is important to recognize that Lygia indeed abandoned the field of art and opted for therapy, after her brief passage through the university. This is a strategic decision that should be recognized as such.”<sup>541</sup> Clark’s “extraterritorial drift,”<sup>542</sup> her desertion of the art world towards therapeutic practice, constituted, to some extent, a necessary development of the trajectory initiated as early as 1954 with the breach of the canvas frame.

In an interview with Fernando Cocchiarale and Anna Bella Geiger, Ferreira Gullar argued that it was the pursuit of direct action in real life that led Neoconcrete artists beyond the limits of art. Yet, while Clark, and Gullar himself, strategically drifted away from the territory of art, Oiticica determinedly resisted the dislocation. This “necessity of real action,” Gullar remarked, “is what transformed Lygia into a therapist, and me into a subversive activist.”<sup>543</sup> Oiticica, on the other hand, “never gave up art. When I moved into politics and denied art, I said: ‘Art is supposed to change the world and society.’ Oiticica lived this contradiction. He followed neither Lygia’s path, nor the political path; and he ended up destroying himself.”<sup>544</sup> Hélio Oiticica died in 1980 at the age of 43.

Half a century after the first Neoconcrete experiments, Oiticica’s legacy still lives on in uneasy tension with the realm of institutionalized art. During the last

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<sup>541</sup> Suely Rolnik, “The Body’s Contagious Memory: Lygia Clark’s Return to the Museum” in EIPCP (European Institute for Progressive Cultural Politics) <<http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/0507/rolnik/en>>

<sup>542</sup> The expression is by Brian Holmes, quoted by Rolnik, *Ibid*.

<sup>543</sup> Ferreira Gullar, Interview. in *Abstracionismo Geométrico e Informal*, p. 98.

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid*.

decades both Oiticica and Clark have attained unparalleled critical acclaim within the Brazilian contemporary art establishment and significant attention in the international arena. Nonetheless, the museum itself as a space and frame is still reluctant and/or essentially unable to encompass the sort of experience which their works propose. In 1994, during the 22<sup>nd</sup> Biennale, when *passistas* (samba dancers) from the São Paulo-based samba club Vai-Vai danced their way into the exhibition halls wearing Oiticica's Parangolés, Dutch curator Wim Beeren, in a sudden display of lack of art-historical consciousness (or was it a deliberate position?), ferociously drove them out of the room where a Malevitch retrospective was taking place. Beeren's gesture, and the incident as a whole, seemed to quote an earlier episode, when Oiticica himself and several *passistas* from Mangueira holding banners and wearing Parangolé capes were expelled from the opening ceremony of the exhibition "Opinião 65" at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro.<sup>545</sup> Once again, the museum reinforced the boundaries and borders of the territory of institutionalized art.



Figure 107. Curator Wim Beeren during the 22<sup>nd</sup> São Paulo Biennale: "Out of here!"

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<sup>545</sup> Claudir Chaves, "Parangolé impedido no MAM [Parangolé banned at the MAM]" in *Diário Carioca*, 14 Aug. 1965.

The tension of this incompatibility is perhaps even higher when the institution of art, in its recurrent reterritorialization, attempts to encompass the element of participation and relationality. The problem is not particular to Oiticica's oeuvre. It is also at work when Ushio Shinohara performs his boxing paintings in the gardens of the Los Angeles Getty Museum during a conference on Japanese 1960s avant-garde art,<sup>546</sup> or when Katō Norihiro reenacts the street performances of Zero Jigen in theaters and galleries in Tokyo and New York City. As Akasegawa remarked, inside the museum the *objet* is tamed, just like "evidence" in the courtroom; in fact, this taming does not even require the physical space of the museum itself, but can be attained by the simple naming of something as "art."

This problem persists despite recent efforts to promote participation within the exhibition space instead of turning works into objects for contemplation. When Oiticica's works were granted a special space in the 2006 São Paulo Biennale, the curators attempted to actualize the participatory, relational character of the Parangolés through several movies shot by the artist himself; and in the 2008 exhibition "The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now," at The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, a copy of Lygia Clark's 1968 *Glasses* was made available for the public to touch and experiment with. Yet, the question remains whether or not these adaptations are sufficient to reproduce the radical experiences which those works sought to bring about.

Ultimately, what is it that such works really require or propose? How can we take part in the experimental exercise of freedom which they purportedly embody? What does it really mean to "participate"? In these questions, which constitute a

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<sup>546</sup> Ushio Shinohara performed his boxing paintings during Rajikaru! Experimentations in Japanese Art 1950-1975 organized by PoNJA-GenKon and The Getty Research Institute, April 27-29, 2007.



crucial legacy of the 1960s avant-gardes, the problem of contemporaneity itself is at stake.

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