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# Political crisis and artistic renewal in 1960s and 1970s Brazil: transgressing paradigms and prohibitions

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# Political crisis and artistic renewal in 1960s and 1970s Brazil: transgressing paradigms and prohibitions

Maria de Fátima Morethy Couto

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## The crisis of the object : transgressing formal paradigms

- 1 “At last we can kick a work of art !” exclaimed the art critic Mário Pedrosa when faced with Lygia Clark’s *Obras moles* [Soft Works], “sculptures” made of rubber, which could take the most unusual shapes when handled. Made in 1964, the year of the military *coup d’état* in Brazil, these soft works followed her *Bichos* [Creatures], hinged aluminium plate structures, the shapes of which can be manipulated so as to resemble living organisms, and her *Trepantes* [Climbers], continuous stainless steel structures composed of cut and joined ribbons, reminiscent of Möbius strips. In 1963 Clark had made an even more radical proposal : *Caminhando* [Walking Along], which involved a strip of paper glued to form a Möbius ring, and a pair of scissors. The proposal consisted of cutting the strip lengthways and then repeating the action, cutting the paper narrower and narrower until it could not be cut any more. According to the artist the ‘only meaning’ of the experience would be the act of executing it.
- 2 These works represent a turning point in Clark’s oeuvre, which would become increasingly characterised by the desire to encourage spectator participation, to grant him the power to act on the experience, to transform him into a co-author of the work. For Mário Pedrosa, these works proved that it was no longer “the art that she (Lygia) revered, but rather the behaviour in view of existence, the totalizing action of life, the catalytic force of creative activity.” (PEDROSA, 1998 : 350) With *Caminhando*, states French critic Jean Clay in 1968, “Lygia proposes an artistic manifestation that is summed up in a

pure act. Once the act is finished, its support is thrown away. We reach the object's zero point." (CLAY, 1968 : 13)

- 3 Since 1964 the artist had signalled the importance of these works as regards the integration between subject and object and the significance of pure act. In Clark's own words : "each 'animal' [*Bicho*] is an organic entity completely revealed inside his inner time of expression. He is alive, and an essentially active work. A total, existential interaction can be established between you and him. And in this relationship there is no passivity, neither on your part nor on his". (SIGNALS NEWSBULLETIN, 1965 : 2) On *Caminhando*, she wrote that "it is the absolute itself that you hold in your hands. (...) When asked what will come out of it my answer is : I don't know, neither do you ; we will see how it reveals itself".<sup>1</sup> (SIGNALS NEWSBULLETIN, 1965 : 2)
- 4 Lygia Clark was one of the protagonists of the neoconcrete movement in Brazil, created in 1959 to oppose the extreme rationalism of the Brazilian abstract avant-garde, practiced in São Paulo by the members of *Grupo Ruptura* [Rupture Group] from 1952 onwards, but without relinquishing their relationship with constructivist ideas. We must not forget that abstraction was regarded with reservation and resistance in the country right up to the 1940s, both by politicized artists and members of the modernist generation, for it was believed that only figurative art could have a legitimate social purpose and be accessible to all. At the end of World War II, however, we witnessed a general commitment to an objective and universal artistic language, capable of contributing to the construction of a new and modern country. New museums, devoted to modern art, and the São Paulo Biennial were then established with private funding and concrete art was gradually adopted by most of the new Brazilian avant-garde.<sup>2</sup> Integration between the artist and the industry appeared key for the creation of a modern country capable of keeping pace with more developed nations, as preached by the slogan "fifty years in five" of the Kubitschek administration, responsible for building Brasília, the finest example of the strength of modern architecture in Brazil.
- 5 When comparing Clark's *Trepantes* or *Caminhando* to *Tripartite Unity*, which earned Max Bill the prize for best sculpture at the 1st São Paulo Biennial in 1951, and which influenced the concretist generation in Brazil, or her *Bichos* to *Concreção 5730* [Concretion 5730], by Luis Sacilloto, from the *Grupo Ruptura*, we can note that the invitation to act, to manipulate, questions the rules that govern object and subject in art.<sup>3</sup> In similar fashion to Lygia Clark's works, Hélio Oiticica's *Bilaterais, Núcleos e Penetráveis* [Bilaterals, Nuclei and Penetrables] also ask the spectator to participate in "throwing colour off the rectangle, off the wall" and creating an active space that changes the customary art experience. In them, the spectator "penetrates a field of action and experiences a space of tensions, walking through mazes of colour, immersed in colour." (FAVARETTO, 1992 : 51-52).
- 6 For the members of the neoconcrete movement, concrete art, as it was understood and practiced in São Paulo, was no more than the import of a foreign model, which ill-fitted the specific conditions of the country.<sup>4</sup> The *Neoconcrete Manifesto*, published in March 1959 in the *Jornal do Brasil*, proposed "a new understanding of all so-called abstract art, of a geometric nature, with the objective of eliminating scientific-like precepts that create[d] a barrier between that art and the public".<sup>5</sup> Its signatories intended to break away from the 'dogmatism' of concrete art and its attachment to optical effects through focusing on the body, intuition and experimentation in artistic practice. Inspired by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, they defended the notion that in art shapes lose their objective

geometric character to become vehicles of the imagination. They believed in retrieving the original ideas of Mondrian and Malevich to bestow upon art a utopian potential and in considering it an efficient means of transforming man and society.

- 7 Mário Pedrosa, together with the poet and critic Ferreira Gullar, was one of the early advocates of the neoconcrete movement and its radical ideas, which represented a methodological challenge in Brazil for lovers of conventional art and defenders of geometric abstraction alike. At the time of the launch of the *Neoconcrete Manifesto*, Pedrosa was in Japan, where he had gone to study with a UNESCO fellowship. Unlike Gullar, he did not participate in its formulation, and was not a signatory on the manifesto. However, as Flávio Moura points out, “Pedrosa’s lack of direct involvement in neoconcretism did not diminish his centrality in that process.”<sup>6</sup> (MOURA, 2014 : 156) Pedrosa was the first critic in Brazil to systematically defend abstract art (of a constructive tendency) since the 1940s, considering it one of the most powerful instruments for creating a new society. He acted as a mentor for the neoconcrete artists, who regularly gathered in his Rio de Janeiro apartment. He was also the interpreter and ambassador for the group, in Brazil and abroad, promoting their works, projects and ideas in articles, conferences and meetings. He saw the invitation for spectator participation as one of the main contributions of the investigations derived from neoconcretism, having been cultivated by the new generation that had emerged in the 1960s. In this regard, he writes in 1965, in defence of an art in which “the plastic values tend to be absorbed in the plasticity of the perceptive and situational structures”, highlighting the relationship between Oiticica’s *Penetráveis* and Clark’s *Bichos* :

[In *Penetráveis*] the subject was enclosed in colour. He was invaded with colour, felt the physical contact of the colour, touched, trod on and breathed colour. Like in Clark’s *Bichos* experiment, the spectator was no longer a passive onlooker, but now attracted to an option that was not in the area of his everyday conventional cogitations, but in the artist’s cogitations, and participated in them, in a direct communication through gesture and through action. It is what the avant-garde artists of the world want today, and it really is the secret furniture of the happenings. (PEDROSA, 1998 : 356-357)

- 8 Ferreira Gullar, in turn, took an active part in steering the movement, leading the breakaway from the São Paulo artists after diverging from the overly objective conception focused on visual and sound effects of the word of the Paulista concrete poets, including brothers Augusto and Haroldo Campos.<sup>7</sup> For Gullar the concrete poem could not go beyond its graphic dimension, for it reduced the page to a graphic space and the word to an element of that space. Neoconcrete poetry on the other hand, in his opinion, returned the word to the condition of verb, opening up a new field for expressive experiences. Recalling his participation in the movement, years later Gullar would declare that :

we felt like we were penetrating a new space, which implied in ruptures of unforeseeable consequences, in both the fields of art and of poetry. The sensation of venturing into a new expressive dimension served as stimulus for all the participants of the movement who thus surrendered themselves to the most audacious experiences. (GULLAR, 1998 : 11)

- 9 Gullar understood the potential of renewal of this moment of crisis of the object and wrote confidently about works of art that he did not entirely comprehend. As well as having played a key role in developing the *Neoconcrete Manifesto*, he wrote the “Theory of the Non-Object”, a text in which he coined the term ‘non-object’ to refer to artworks such

as those by Lygia Clark and also Hélio Oiticica, “which were neither paintings nor sculptures nor utility objects”, and which “were made outside all artistic convention”.<sup>8</sup>

- 10 For Gullar, the abolition of the notions of frame and base [in Franz Weissmann and Amílcar de Castro, for instance] and the leap from the pictorial plane into real space [in Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark] were the crucial points in neoconcrete experiences. He believed that neoconcretism foreshadowed international movements by breaking away from the traditional art categories and proposing “an effectively non-figurative language, the expression of which dispensed with any metaphorical space.” (AMARAL, 1977 : 120)
- 11 We should bear in mind, however, that neoconcretism lived a short life as an organised movement. Only two years after the publication of the Manifesto, the third and final neoconcrete exhibition was held. One factor that contributed to the end of the movement and the dispersal of its members was Ferreira Gullar’s moving to Brasília in 1961 to work in the left-wing government of the new president João Goulart, following the resignation of Jânio Quadros. In Brasília, according to his own account, he intended to develop an avant-garde activity parallel to the promotion of popular art, creating the Museum of Popular Art and a popular art studio. However, as he stated years later :
- the avant-garde part was easy. But the development of the popular sector was not possible, because the *candango* [manual worker] left the house at six a.m., worked all day and returned home on the back of a truck... exhausted ! In this experience I really began to feel ... I got back in touch with the Northeasterner ... and got more politicized, in touch with the reality of the culture, I mean, the culture not only how poetry was done, but the culture as the practical thing, of implementing it, of taking it to the masses, to the people. (...) When I returned to Rio, in 1961 to 1962, I could no longer be the same intellectual as before, I was already focused on other issues. (PEREIRA and HOLLANDA, 1980 : pp. 61-74)
- 12 Upon returning to Rio de Janeiro Gullar abandoned his avant-garde experience to champion a “revolutionary popular art” at the service of the people and the actual interests of the nation. Art, he declares in his 1965 book *Cultura posta em questão* [Culture called into question], “should be a means of collective communication and the work should act as a vehicle to raise public awareness instead of being just the apparent face of the artist’s extreme subjectivity.” (GULLAR, 1965 : 26) In *Vanguarda e Subdesenvolvimento* [Avant-garde and Underdevelopment], a book launched in 1969, Gullar questions the validity of a universal concept of the avant-garde, arguing in favour of the historicity of the artistic phenomenon and the search for a specific, national aesthetic expression. In his opinion, an avant-garde aesthetic concept valid in Europe or in the USA, would not be equally valid in an underdeveloped country like Brazil. The artist should be responsible for expressing the reality he lives, experiences and knows.

## On adversity we live : art and social engagement

- 13 “On adversity we live !” thus concluded Hélio Oiticica with an air of revolt and alert in his presentation text for the *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* [New Brazilian Objectivity] exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro in April 1967. This show was one of a series of avant-garde exhibitions held at some galleries and museums in Rio and São Paulo between 1964, the year João Goulart was deposed by the Brazilian army and the military regime was implemented, and 1968, marked by the passing of Institutional Act 5 (AI-5), which granted the president the power to provisionally close Congress, intervene

in the states and municipalities, revoke terms of office and suspend political rights, as well as dismiss or retire civil servants.

- 14 Initially the military coup caused a radicalization of public debate, leading artists and intellectuals to adopt stances in relation to the country's problems. As Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda notes,
- cultural production, broadly controlled by the left, in this pre - and post - 64 period will be marked by the themes of the political debate. Whether in terms of production in populist traits, or in relation to the avant-gardes, the themes of modernization, democratization, nationalism and 'faith in the people' will be at the heart of the discussions, informing and outlining the need for a participant art, forging the myth of the revolutionary reach of the poetic word. (HOLLANDA, 1981 : 17)
- 15 Despite the implementation of censorship, until 1968 there was still the opportunity for political challenge and several artists sought to take on leading roles in the resistance against the regressive process underway.<sup>9</sup> There were, for instance, the renowned provocative plays of *Teatro de Arena* and *Grupo Opinião* presented during those years, and the songs of protest that marked the music festivals. We should also remember the *Passeata dos cem mil* or March of a hundred thousand people, on June 1968, in Rio de Janeiro, protesting against the death of a 18 year-old student in a confrontation with police.
- 16 The aforementioned exhibitions, which included the *Opinião 65* [Opinion 65] and *Opinião 66* [Opinion 66] shows, held in Rio de Janeiro, and *Propostas 65* [Proposals 65] and *Propostas 66* [Proposals 66], in São Paulo, shared this critical spirit and were “the most powerful arena for Brazilian avant-garde ideas during the 1960s, (...) breaking down the frontiers of the public's reception of art and forming the quintessential stage for the artists' formal experiments”. (REIS, 2005 : 165) They strove to promote the work of artists interested in establishing a critical dialogue with the country's reality, whilst also aiming to stimulate theoretical reflection through debates and the publication of texts. The vast majority of the works presented there questioned the effective power to instill social transformation attributed to abstract art up to the late 1950s, while they also rejected conventional artistic media and supports. In place of paintings and sculptures, objects and *assemblages* made of more primitive materials and unconcerned about representing highly refined craft, invaded the exhibition rooms of the time and were commented in the press.
- 17 With the dream broken of Brazil being able to occupy a privileged place in the international order of nations and keeping pace with the more developed nations, now the feeling grew to assume the underdeveloped condition of the country and to establish its own artistic language. The references to Mondrian and Malevich, which were so important to the first defenders of abstraction in Brazil, no longer seemed to make much sense to the majority of young artists, who now turned to the real world and tried to establish direct contact with the Brazilian people. The communicative power of artwork once again captured their interest, without this implying a return to the precepts that guided the modernist generation. Gradually the country witnessed the retrieval of figuration in a new allusive tone and the first attempts to integrate art and mass culture, to critically absorb (and contest) international pop art, in the works of artists such as Antonio Dias, Rubens Gerchman, Cláudio Tozzi, Pedro Escosteguy, Marcello Nitsche, who showed themselves sensitive to the products of the mass media (cinema, television, comic books), to topics that occupied the public's mind (such as urban problems of daily life, football and unemployment).

- 18 For Mário Schenberg,<sup>10</sup> one of the principal champions of a figuration of a social nature in Brazil, abstract art played a significant role in the updating of Brazilian art with international avant-gardes, but failed to create an effectively national artistic expression :
- Today we can understand that abstractionism, above all in its concretist variety, played an important part in untangling the Brazilian artistic movement of anachronous forms of naturalism and realism. It did not, however, manage to help better define our cultural physiognomy, contrary to what happened in the United States with abstract expressionism. This historical-cultural task was reserved for the new forms of realism, as several factors indicate. Indeed, even in the United States pop art contributed more than abstractionism toward characterizing some essential aspects of the cultural and social physiognomy. (CORDEIRO, 1965).
- 19 The return to the image, however, did not occur in an entirely unified manner.<sup>11</sup> Whereas some artists, like Rubens Gerchman, sought inspiration in newspaper reports, various facts, and in media events (like beauty pageants) to portray and/or denounce the conditions of modern life, others, like Pedro Escoteguy, defended a social function for avant-garde art, with works in which irony was excluded for the sake of an engaged, challenging discourse that combined the visual and the verbal and sought to draw the spectator out of his contemplative attitude.<sup>12</sup>
- 20 It should be highlighted that some members of the concrete/neoconcrete movements also abandoned abstraction for an art with a stronger and more direct appeal. Waldemar Cordeiro, who had acted as leader of the São Paulo concrete group in the 1950s had 'decreed' the end of 'historic concrete art' in 1963, launching the concept of semantic concrete art, capable of 'addressing, in the scope of the more immediate and common materiality, the contingent issue of social affairs'. (WILDER, 1982 : 91) His *popcretos* – painting-objects (*assemblages*) built from the fragments of everyday objects and scrap metal – are examples of his turn toward a realist art, or art connected to the real, in the terms discussed by Pierre Restany and *Les nouveaux réalistes* in France.<sup>13</sup>
- 21 Of the neoconcrete group, Oiticica was one of the artists most concerned with ensuring his work carried a political dimension capable of interfering with the social makeup and of contributing to the creation of “a typically Brazilian culture, with its own characteristics and personality.” (OITICICA, 1986 : 85) As Michael Asbury notes, “the transition between the optimistic 1950s and the tumultuous 1960s deeply affected his practice, (...) and he now attempted to articulate Brazilian popular culture with his previous aesthetic experiments (...) in an altogether different context to that of neoconcretism.” (ASBURY, 2005 : 184)
- 22 In the text written for the *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* exhibition, Oiticica defends the need for total participation of the artist, and the intellectual in general, in the events and problems of the country and the world.<sup>14</sup> Likewise Ferreira Gullar, whom Oiticica admired, he wondered “how, in an underdeveloped country, one could explain the emergence of an avant-garde and justify it (...) as a decisive factor in its collective progress? How can one situate the artist’s activity? The problem could be faced with another question: for whom does the artist make his work?”<sup>15</sup> (OITICICA, 1986 : 97) However, refuting those who prioritised content over experimentation, he deemed it fundamental to retrieve and defend new formulations of the concept of anti-art, a theme he had discussed at length in a 1966 text.
- 23 To Oiticica, “aesthetics positions [had become] intolerable in our cultural panorama”. In his opinion, the avant-garde phenomenon of 1960s Brazil “was no longer a matter of a

group coming from an isolated elite, but rather a broad, far-reaching, cultural matter, tending toward collective solutions.” The artist’s relationship with the public should “be on a large scale (...) with the proposition of unfinished, open-ended works”, capable of introducing the spectator into the creative process through non-alienated experiences. It was therefore necessary to create “new experimental conditions”, in which the artist could assume “the role of proposition-maker, impresario or even educator.” (OITICICA, 1986 : 97) In a letter sent to critic Guy Brett in 1968, Oiticica asserts that “creativity is inherent to everyone, the artist should only trigger it, set it alight, free people from their conditioning – the old way of seeing the artist as an untouchable is dead.”<sup>16</sup>

- 24 In 1965, during the private view of the *Opinião 65* show, Oiticica presented his *Parangolés*, cloaks made to be worn, pushing the institutional limits of the museum by involving dancers from the Mangueira samba school, which he had started to frequent. The dancers were barred from entering the museum and, amid Oiticica’s loud protests, they performed in the museum gardens, attracting many of the visitors from the exhibition. As reported by Rubens Gerchman :

Nobody knew if Oiticica was a genius or crazy and, suddenly I saw him and was amazed. He walked into the museum with the group from Mangueira and we followed. They wanted to throw him out, he answers with curse words, shouting so that everyone could hear : yes, that’s right, nigger [crioulo] is not allowed in the MAM, this is racism ! And he got more and more carried away. He was thrown out and put on the show in the gardens, bringing with him the crowd of people who were nudging each other among the paintings. (MORAIS, 1984)

- 25 The *Parangolé*, as Oiticica states, “requires direct corporal participation ; besides covering the body, asks it to move, to dance in the final analysis.” The spectator is thereby transformed into a supporting and fundamental element of the work, which only acquires existence through the action of his body. As Clark had done two years earlier with *Caminhando*, Oiticica liberates himself of the notion of the work of art as an object, a relic, adding to his practice a strong conceptual feature.
- 26 In *Nova Objetividade Brasileira*, which featured 40 artists from two different generations, Oiticica’s *Tropicália* setting consisted of “two cabins (penetrables) amid a tropical scene with plants, parrots, sand, gravel, poems and, inside, strongly-scented roots, plastic objects, etc. The spectator/participant walked inside barefoot, following a path that ended in front of a television set that had been left on. At the time, Oiticica said that *Tropicália* referred to the cracks and architecture of the favelas (shanty towns) and that it resulted “directly from this fundamental need to characterise a Brazilian state”, to shape an essentially national avant-garde :

*Tropicália* is the very first conscious, objective attempt to impose an obviously Brazilian image upon the current context of the avant-garde and national art manifestations in general of Brazilian art and contributed strongly to this objectification of a total Brazilian image, to the downfall of the universalist myth of Brazilian culture, entirely based on Europe and North America, and on an Aryanism which is inadmissible here : in reality, with *Tropicália* I wanted to create the myth of miscegenation – we are Blacks, Indians, Whites, everything at the same time. (OITICICA, 1986 : 107-108)

- 27 In my view, *Tropicália* can be seen as a manifesto, a synthesis of the ideas developed by the artist and that reflect the craving of a generation who experienced the decline of a modernization project and that wanted to go beyond that project, critically questioning the reality of the country. As Celso Favaretto observed, *Tropicália*, however, “does not produce a totalizing idea of Brazil. (...) In the labyrinth one experiences the unlimited and



the indeterminate, transmutation as loss of identity in the construction of different identities". For him, in combining experimentalism and critique, transcending the image by highlighting the "direct experiential element", *Tropicália* defines a language of resistance against dilution.<sup>17</sup> (FAVARETTO, 1992 : 17) In the words of Oiticica himself, "in Brazil, nowadays, to adopt an active cultural stance which matters, one has to be viscerally against everything that would sum up cultural, political, ethical and social conformism."<sup>18</sup> (OITICICA, 1986 : 98)

- 28 Nevertheless, the incited censorship and persecution of anyone who opposed the regime after the passing of AI-5 would provoke a genuine fracture in the Brazilian artistic and intellectual scene, creating a legion of underground activists, refugees or political prisoners, not to mention those who were killed or disappeared. At different times and under different conditions, Lygia Clark, Ferreira Gullar and Mário Pedrosa and Hélio Oiticica all left Brazil. Pedrosa, who would never forsake the revolutionary potential of abstract art, requested asylum in Chile, where he was lecturing and working as director of the newly-created *Museo de la Solidaridad* at the time of the coup d'état against Salvador Allende, in 1973. He left for Mexico and then Paris, where Lygia Clark was already living since September 1968. Ferreira Gullar, a known member of the Brazilian Communist Party, began a bleak tour of Moscow, Santiago, Lima and Buenos Aires. Oiticica left for London in December 1968. He returned to Brazil in 1970 but soon set off for New York as a Guggenheim Foundation fellow, where he lived until 1978.

## Who killed Herzog ? Dictatorship and guerrilla art

- 29 The question *Who killed Herzog ?* was stamped on one *cruzeiro* notes by the artist Cildo Meireles, who then released them back into circulation.<sup>19</sup> Writing on bank notes was and is still commonplace in Brazil, despite being illegal. This work belonged to the series entitled *Inserções em Circuitos Ideológicos* [Insertions in Ideological Circuits], which the artist began in the early 1970s and was based on various interventions using bank notes and Coca-Cola bottles. Meireles made use of this practice as a form of protest. In his opinion, the works from the *Inserções* series should be regarded as art actions, as propositions for action and participation, rather than objects.
- 30 "They are a negation of authorship, of copyright and can be made by anyone, at any time in any place".<sup>20</sup> (MEIRELES and MORAIS, 2008) *Who killed Herzog ?* however, stands out from the other works the series by challenging, albeit anonymously, the military regime.
- 31 Meireles' question referred to the assassination of 38 year-old journalist Vladimir Herzog at the DOI-Codi (Department of Information Operations - Centre for Internal Defence Operations) the repression agency connected to the Brazilian army, in São Paulo on the morning of 25 October 1975. Herzog had presented himself early that morning to give a statement about his supposed connection to the Communist Party, after police officers had sought him at his workplace the previous day. The official version of his death, corroborated by a photograph and a medical report, was that he committed suicide, hanging himself with the belt from his prisoner overalls. Needless to say that the suicide story convinced no-one. The torture of political prisoners had become a systematic practice of the dictatorship, to the extent and degree of violence that it had attracted criticism and denouncement by international human rights organisations.

- 32 Herzog's death was a sad episode in the history of the Brazilian military dictatorship and contributed to its downfall. On 31 October 1975 an ecumenical service held in memory of the journalist and conducted by a cardinal, a rabbi and a vicar attracted 8.000 people and developed into a silent protest against the regime, which came to an end only in 1985, but underwent a slow and controlled loosening process as from 1978, when president Ernesto Geisel revoked AI-5. Several exiled activists and émigrés then returned to Brazil under the promise of amnesty.
- 33 Cildo Meireles began in arts in the late 1960s and, although reluctant to speak of influences, cites Clark and Oiticica as two artists who were very important in his education. Meireles neither considers himself a "political artist" nor believes that conceptual art in Brazil had an essentially political nature, as maintained by those who use the term *conceptualism* to underline the reactive character of Latin American art of the period. In an interview with Frederico Morais, Meireles stated the following about his work :
- I despise any form of pamphleteering in art, which is the risk we run when art is politically biased. So I don't think the political situation was my generation's motivation element, even less so in my case. I do, however, acknowledge that some of my work is political. (...) While my works are not politically motivated, they may become political at certain moments, under certain circumstances. (MEIRELES and MORAIS, 2008).
- 34 Nonetheless, as he himself declares in the same interview, "the new political situation slowly began to affect everybody and everything." And he indicates *Tiradentes: totem-monumento ao preso político* [Tiradentes : Totem-Monument to the Political Prisoner], from 1970, as one of his undeniably political works. Mentioning the political prisoner in the title is ambiguous, for Tiradentes (Joaquim José da Silva Xavier), an important figure in the *Inconfidência Mineira* [Minas Gerais Conspiracy], an 18th-century rebellion against Portuguese domination, had been a political prisoner who was hung, drawn and quartered. Therefore, the *Totem-Monumento* could only refer to or celebrate an historical figure and not allude to the present situation. However, the radical action proposed by Meireles leaves no doubt as to his intention. It was part of an exhibition that marked the period, *Do corpo à terra* [From Body to Earth], held in 1970 at the Municipal Park of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, the state which also played host to the *Inconfidência Mineira*.
- 35 As the curator of the show, critic Frederico Morais, explained
- for the first time in Brazil artists were invited not to exhibit already finished works, but rather to create their works directly at the venue. (...) In the park, the works were developed at different times and places, which meant that no-one, including the artists and the curator, witnessed all the individual manifestations (...) All the artists received a letter signed by the president of Hidrominas [the utility that sponsored the event] authorising them to perform the works in the park (...) which would encourage even more radical work. (MORAIS, 2001)
- 36 Meireles' action consisted of tying ten living chickens to a wooden post and setting fire to it, burning them alive. Besides the ashes, the remnants of the action were a few photographs and a bitter memory for those who witnessed the scene. It was a radical gesture that could only be understood or tolerated in light of the moment of strong political and social tension the country was passing through. But Meireles' was not the only action at the exhibition to allude to violence. Luiz Alphonsus also made use of fire to highlight the violence of a militarized world, setting fire to a fifteen metre-long strip of plastic that he lay across the Municipal Park, in reference to the napalm used against

civilians in the Vietnam war. The plastic was twisted by the fire and stuck to the grass, burning for hours on end. Artur Barrio, meanwhile, anonymously threw bundles filled with beef, bones and blood into the stream that cuts through the park. The bundles appeared floating on the surface of the water and caught the attention of onlookers, the fire brigade and local police. His action also surpassed the conventional boundaries of art, evoking – or simulating – the mutilation and “spawning” of bodies practiced by extermination groups active at the time.

37 Such unforeseen, ephemeral actions swerved censorship while launching suppressed and forbidden issues into the public domain. They exemplified and gave form to the notion forged months before the event by Frederico Morais in a text written for a Brazilian art magazine. I refer to the notion of art as “a kind of ambush” and of the artist as a “warrior”, capable of “transforming everything into art, even the most banal, everyday event.” (MORAIS, 1975 : 26)

38 Born in Belo Horizonte, Morais had arrived in Rio de Janeiro in 1966, at the age of 30, and began to actively participate in the development and promotion (in his arts column in the *Diário de Notícias*) of several avant-garde events. His name is directly related to innovative exhibitions and shows held in the 1960s/70s and the importance of his work in those difficult years cannot be understated. In several texts, Morais discussed the transgressive function of an avant-garde artist working in a divided society, pressured on the one side by the repressive force of the dictatorship and, on the other, by the dream of armed struggle and by the vigour of the counterculture. As Artur Freitas states :

Frederico Morais played an important intellectual role as he could diagnose like few could, in the form of analogies, the extent of the fracture between art, politics and society. (...) In many of his texts he launched what were without doubt controversial, yet often generous and politicized theories, almost always urgent and as a rule committed to a refined sense of actuality. (...) In brief, he was a typical *militant critic* – a driver of ideas and ingenious inventor of his time.<sup>21</sup> (FREITAS, 2007 : 10)

39 In his text, *Contra a arte afluyente : o corpo é o motor da obra* [Against affluent art : the body is the engine of the work], Morais borrows military jargon, that emphasised the idea of combat and fighting, to defend the local, experimental artwork that took a critical approach on the fringes of the art system and outside the market, but refused to be subject to declared ideological and partisan stances. The Brazilian avant-garde artist – whether working inside or outside the museums and galleries – should, in his opinion, no longer be expected to produce works for contemplation, but rather to propose situations to be lived and experienced. He should act “unpredictably, wherever and whenever least expected, in an unusual manner” and so as “to create a permanent state of tension, a constant expectation.” (MORAIS, 1975 : 26) In this notion, that prioritises chance and randomness, it is not only the artist, but also the public and critic who constantly change position, no longer assuming roles that are fixed and defined in advance.

40 While he retrieves the value of the neoconcrete legacy, especially as regards spectator participation, Morais goes beyond the paradigms of the movement, asserting that what matters is the idea, the proposal. On the other hand, he rejects a technology-crazed art, dominant in developed countries, in favour of a “poor, underdeveloped, Brazilian art”, that works with banal materials, with the “waste of the consumer society”. “No high-quality, beautiful materials, nothing more than the happening, the concept”, he states. “In the case of Brazil, what matters is making the misery, the underdevelopment our primary treasure.” (MORAIS, 1975 : 34)

- 41 Morais thus asserted his belief in the revolutionary and strategic power of the artistic manifestations of underdeveloped countries, a theory that was shared by many intellectuals of the time.<sup>22</sup> In his view, “the contestation of affluent art should be, above all, a task of the third world, of Latin America, of countries like ours.” (MORAIS, 1975 : 26)
- 42 In an interview granted to Francisco Bittencourt and published in the *Jornal do Brasil* in May of the same year, instigated by the *Do corpo à Terra* exhibition, Morais declares that  
 our problem is not ethical – against aesthetic onanism. Avant-garde is not the updating of materials, it is not technological art. It is a sharing, a way of viewing things, men and materials, it is a defined attitude toward the world. It is the precarious as standard, struggle as life process. (...) We work with fire, blood, bones, mud, earth or rubbish. What we do are celebrations, rites, sacrificial rituals. Our instrument is the body itself – against the computers. We use the head – against the heart. And the guts, if necessary. (FREITAS, 2007 : 238-239)
- 43 Years later, Morais would censure the “affirmatively dogmatic rhetoric, reminiscent of the language of other manifestos of the historical avant-garde’ which he used in several texts in that period. (SEFFRIN, 2004 : 118) After the passing of the 1979 Amnesty Law and the beginning of (re)democratization, a time of celebrating newly achieved freedom in the country, radical oppositions and political stances no longer seemed welcome and Morais would revise several of his theories, especially those related to the importance of conceptual ideas in the process of making art, now stating his concern with ‘understanding, before judging’ and ‘following what is happening’. However, this “dogmatic rhetoric” reveals the desire to maintain autonomous thinking and critical awareness in an environment of great public tension, where individual freedom was curbed, and there was no space for utopia nor for the promise of a new man built through a regenerative relationship.
- 44 The modernist dream of creating an art of a universal language, yet capable of updating and transforming the country, which had marked the first generation of the defenders of abstraction not only in Brazil but also in the rest of South America, had lost ground and direction in the 1960s amid an acute political crisis. Many agents involved in this collective project found themselves driven to take sides in view of the country’s new situation and/or to emigrate. Some, like Ferreira Gullar, began to question the actual transformative capacity of an avant-garde art, others, like Oiticica, endeavoured to build a typically Brazilian art, “with its own characteristics and personality”, yet still profoundly experimental and aimed at spectator participation. In the 1970s, however, art in Brazil could no longer be seen as a “territory of freedom and outburst of the artist’s expression and of the old spectator (now participant),” as Tadeu Chiarelli pointed out. The artist’s and the art critic’s roles were no longer performed in an intended “area of unconditional freedom, of irrepressible protest, (...) of irreverence and of unpassable boundaries.” (CHIARELLI, 1992 : 24) To stand up to the system and its sophisticated repressive arrangement, it was necessary to create alternative strategies that abdicated from institutional spaces and from the traditional images of curators, museologists and historians, as I sought to exemplify by the actions of Cildo Meireles and Frederico Morais.

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## NOTES

1. In an interview years later Clark would say that "with the *Bichos* it was the first time I let go of the obsession of wanting to be the greatest." Interview with Lygia Clark. In : COCCHIARALE and GEIGER, 1987 : 149)
2. The Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro and the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo were both created in 1948 taking as model the MoMA, New York, and on the initiative of a group of industrialists and businessmen.
3. *Tripartite Unity* is part of the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, University of São Paulo (USP) and *Concreção 5730* belongs to The Adolpho Leirner Collection of Brazilian Constructive Art at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

4. This was of course a confrontation, characteristic of the antagonistic spirit of the avant-gardes, which uses an aggressive and controversial tone to exalt one kind of art at the expense of other forms of artistic expression.
5. The *Neoconcrete Manifesto* was published in the *Jornal do Brasil* on 23 March 1959 and signed by the following artists : Ferreira Gullar, Amílcar de Castro, Lygia Clark, Reynaldo Jardim, Lígia Pape, Theon Spanudis and Franz Weissmann. These seven artists participated in the first Neoconcrete Exhibition. Later Willys de Castro, Hércules Barsotti, Décio Vieira and Hélio Oiticica joined the movement, among a few others.
6. For Flávio Moura “Pedrosa was at that time concerned with other matters, such as the construction of Brasília and the transformative character of the country’s new capital.” Furthermore, in his opinion, the significant generation gap between Pedrosa and the neoconcrete group weighed heavily. “On the verge of turning 60, Pedrosa was no longer in any position to get involved with them by signing avant-garde manifestos.” (MOURA, 2014 : 20)
7. The aim of this, in Augusto de Campos’ words, was “to deautomatize language and revive the words from their elementary, visual and audio materiality.” (FOLHA DE SÃO PAULO, 1996) It should be highlighted that Brazilian concrete poetry swiftly achieved long-lasting international recognition.
8. The “Theory of the Non-Object” was published in the Sunday Supplement of the *Jornal do Brasil*, 19-20 December 1959. As Michael Asbury observes, this text “introduced issues that informed much of the local environmental and participatory work which followed in Brazilian art, and also anticipated theoretical debates that would emerge in North America during the following decade”. (ASBURY, 2005 : 177) For a version of Gullar’s text in English, see ASBURY, 2005 : 168-173.
9. Witness, regarding this, the seminal texts of Roberto Schwarz and Otília Arantes, listed in the bibliography.
10. Mário Schenberg was one of Brazil’s most important theoretical physicists, specially remembered for his contributions to astrophysics. He was also a lover of art and acted as art critic, writing several articles in the 1960s defending the “new realism” in Brazilian contemporary art.
11. It is worth recalling that several abstract painters, especially those who defended an art marked by gesture or by direct contact with the canvas, unmediated by reason, had successful careers in Brazil. Supported by marchands, they exhibited in newly-opened galleries in the country’s main cities, won national and international awards at events such as the São Paulo Biennial, and enjoyed success among the buying public. The São Paulo Biennial of 1959, for example, became known as the *Biennial tachista* and provoked heated debate in the press.
12. In his presentation text for the *Nova Objetividade Brasileira* exhibition which we shall discuss next, Hélio Oiticica refers to Escosteguy as the first to execute “an actual plastic art with a participant character in the political sense (...) where the law of the word governs, key-word, protest-word, word where the poetic side always delivers a social message.’
13. Cordeiro was one of the organizers of the *Propostas 65* exhibition, which featured 48 artists and intended to form an inventory of the “current realism of Brazil”. The catalogue published for the event gathered several texts written by artists and critics on themes such as On the Avant-Garde, Why Feminism, On the threshold of a New Aesthetics, Advertising : Mass Education or Miseducation ?, Realism at the Level of Mass Culture and A New Realism. Mário Schenberg, cited above, was the author of this last text.
14. His text, “Esquema Geral da Nova Objetividade Brasileira” [General Scheme of the New Brazilian Objectivity], made history and became mandatory reference for any research on the period. In it, Oiticica profiles young Brazilian art, speaking of the “multiple avant-garde tendencies” in progress both in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Although he understood that the “lack of unity in thought [was] an important characteristic” of the moment in which they lived,

he believed it was possible to identify the common points shared by the Brazilian avant-garde to set it aside from the big dominant currents in the international realm (especially Optical and Pop Art). They were: a general will to constructive art; a refusal of the canvas and easel; an encouragement to the participation of observers (corporal, tactile, visual, semantic, etc.); an urge to express opinions about political, social, and ethical problems; a tendency towards collective proposals, and a need to produce new concepts of anti-art. (OITICICA, 1986: 84) As Rodrigo Naves observes, it was one of the first theoretical interventions of this kind by a Brazilian artist.

15. Based on a conversation with Gullar, Michael Asbury states that Oiticica “had an adverse reaction” to his defection of neoconcretism (BRETT and FIGUEIREDO, 2007: 39). Oiticica, however, acknowledges Gullar’s new ideas in his text and agrees to the need of positioning artistic practice in terms of its social insertion.

16. Letter from Oiticica to Guy Brett, dated 2 April 1968. Archives of the Whitechapel Gallery.

17. Sérgio Martins describes *Tropicália* as “a phantasmic terrain” and points out that we should not try to “read it but traverse it, live through it so that it does not so much point to any coordinates as become active in the re-founding those coordinates. (...) *Tropicália* maps the loss of the Brazilian image, being thus purely *operational* in its map-making, never actually representational”. Furthermore, he states that “participation in *Tropicália* meant the implication in and short-circuiting of the fantasy of both national-popular or aestheticist discourses – in other words, a plunge into the subject of Brazilian and Modernist history itself”. I totally agree with him. (MARTINS, 2010: 418-419)

18. Quickly, and without direct participation of Oiticica, the word *Tropicália* – or *Tropicalism* – spread from the visual arts field out to comprise an entire avant-garde cultural program in Brazil, experimentally conducted by popular musicians (Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, Tom Zé), poets (Torquato Neto), theatre directors (José Celso Martinez Correa) and moviemakers (Glauber Rocha).

19. *Cruzeiro* was the Brazilian currency at the time.

20. As Meireles states, “the replacement of the paper money and the bottles containing inscriptions (whether handwritten, rubber stamped or printed) made by their users proved too costly for the companies and the state. Because it was globalised, the Coca-Cola circuit was the more charming and ideologically efficient”. (MEIRELES and MORAIS, 2008)

21. Freitas also indicates the presence of similar notions and arguments in texts written by Latin American artists in the same period, such as Luis Camnitzer, Julio Le Parc and León Ferrari, who also addressed the relationship between experimental art and politics.

22. Mário Pedrosa, for instance, will say in his “Discurso aos Tupiniquins ou Nambás” [Speech to the Tupiniquins or Nambas], published in 1975, that “below the line of the hemisphere saturated in wealth, in progress and culture, life germinated.” (PEDROSA, 1995: 335). Although profoundly critical of the mass production of art and of the contemporary artist’s subjection to the market rules and advertising mindset, he saw in non-conformism and in the socially condemnatory tone of Brazilian art of the 1960s a radical difference in relation to North American pop art.

## ABSTRACTS

This article discusses the changes that took place in the art scene in Brazil during the 1960s and 1970s, changes that were related to the political and economic situation the country was



experiencing. The general belief in the modern destiny of the nation of the post-war period was then replaced by a political crisis and economic instability and artists and intellectuals saw themselves breaking away from the autonomy of their field to take sides in relation to the situation in the country. I will therefore discuss how the dream of a collective project for a nation, of an integrated avant-garde, was built and dissolved, in the midst of political turmoil, and how this influenced artists and critics of the time.

L'article porte sur les changements survenus dans la scène artistique brésilienne des années 1960 et 1970 et liés à la situation politique et économique du pays. Tandis que, dans l'après-guerre, le Brésil avait connu une période de forte croissance économique et de modernisation industrielle, dans les années 1960, la croyance générale dans le destin moderne de la nation avait été remplacée par une forte crise politique et économique. La plupart des artistes et intellectuels d'avant-garde se sont alors engagés dans le débat politique et ont pris parti par rapport à la situation du pays. On examinera donc la façon dont le rêve d'un projet collectif de nation (et d'une avant-garde intégrée) a été construit et ensuite dissous, en pleine crise politique, et comment cela a influencé les artistes et les critiques de l'époque.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** art brésilien, dictature militaire, néo-concretisme, critique d'art, art d'avant-garde, Brésil

**Keywords:** brazilian art, military dictatorship, neoconcretism, art criticism, avant-garde art, Brazil