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BODY AND SOUL OF MODERN ART IN SÃO PAULO

Paulo Mendes de Almeida. 2014.
*De Anita ao museu. O modernismo,
da primeira exposição de Anita
Malfatti à primeira Bienal.* São Paulo,
Terceiro Nome, 251p. il. P&b, color.

The modernist movement, which 1922 and the Modern Art Week express and symbolize, is far from being a dormant event, of which there remain in the pages of the historical compendium the expectation that a curious look that makes them reintegrate the course of days. Quite the contrary: the artistic performances that took place at the Municipal Theater of São Paulo, from February 11th to 18th, continue to be present, and very present, in the debates about the arts in the country, about cultural life in the city of São Paulo, and in anniversaries and celebrations, the most varied.

The memory of the São Paulo movement is activated both by those who underline its disruptive character and by those who tend to emphasize continuities or by others who critically challenge the modernist canon. The disputes are many and accumulate in several studies, books and academic theses; a quick search on the sites and libraries is enough to find out about the positions at stake, there is no need to resume them here. But the mention of the debates surrounding the 1922 modernism and its developments seems timely to highlight the critical balance of Paulo Mendes de Almeida, who closely followed those years. The serenity of this viewer, actor and commentator of the artistic life in the capital of São Paulo contrasts with stalled and controversial positions that tend to accompany, until today, the resumption of the movement and its main characters.

Poet, journalist, critic of art and literature, one of the founders of the Modern Pro-Art Society, as well as artistic director of the Modern Art Museum and

secretary of the Biennial (from 1958 and 1959, respectively), Paulo Mendes de Almeida 1905-1986) was undoubtedly a key figure in the arts in Sao Paulo, and *“De Anita ao museu”*, which he signed, is a classic in the full sense of the term. Firmly anchored in the 1950s, the book goes through time, not only because it is an indispensable source for the period, but also because it captures the atmosphere of the time, packed with the tone of the chronicler, whose memories and sharp style revive spaces, scenes and characters; reason enough to welcome the reissue of the volume of 1976 (from the Debates collection, Perspectiva publisher), which expanded the first, from 1961, with thirteen new chapters. But, it should be noted, the current book, presented by the writer, editor and translator Ana Luísa Martins, is not merely a re-launch of the 1976 book; plus, explanatory notes, images and documents that value the text, this volume can be seen as an enlarged edition.

Collecting articles published in the “Suplemento Literário” from the journal O Estado de S. Paulo, between 1958 and 1965, the book draws a precise course, as the title itself indicates: part of the famous exhibition of Anita Malfatti, 1917, considered the propelling element of the movement of 1922, and comes to the creation of the Modern Art Museum in 1949, describing a temporal arc or an “evolution”, as the author wants, which contributes to the history of the arts in the country, without being a systematically constructed historical research. In fact, Paulo Mendes de Almeida’s “notes” or “memorandums” are closer to the memorial record, chained by chronicle and testimony, which gives the text life and rhythm. “Those who lived in these days will remember that everything smelled revolution,” he says, transporting the reader to the environment of the period and putting him in contact with a list of figures, some illustrious, others almost unknown. We are presented to painters, writers, sculptors and architects; critics, journalists, patrons and collectors; to designers, choreographers, set designers and illustrators; to men and women; national and foreign, from different backgrounds. This is one of the remarkable qualities of these reports by Paulo Mendes de Almeida: the way he broadens and diversifies the São Paulo artistic scene in general and the modernist years. In doing so, the writer not only assists in the better understanding of an era, but also provides a wealth of sources and suggestions for further research and analytical pursuits on seemingly exhausted topics.

To the profiles that appear along the narrative, it adds the presentation of the associations they created or joined: The Pro-Art-Modern Society (1932), the Modern Artists’ Club (1932), the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Salons of May (1937, 1938 and 1939), the Paulist Family of Art (1937), Santa Helena Group (1934), the Salons of the Union of Plastic Artists (1938-1949). These associations are described not only in terms of works and exhibitions, but also of broader activities that have promoted: conferences, solemnities,

dances, serenades, parties and concerts. We are thus invited to meet not only the artists, but also the organizers and sponsors of events, magazines and catalogs, and even certain reactions from the public, which addresses us to more recondite dimensions and, unless mistaken, less dealt with by scholars of art. And, as if it were not enough, the artistic life in São Paulo on the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, which the texts of Paulo Mendes de Almeida reconstruct, is inseparable from the urban physiognomy, which is another contribution of the book, which reveals the city of São Paulo in those years, due to the outline of a cartography of the arts, letters and spaces dedicated to them: art galleries, bars, movie theaters, theaters, buildings, libraries and coffee shops.

The consideration of a specific urban artistic-cultural sociability is combined with the examination of aesthetic and critical debates, which illuminate fissures within the groups, giving them renewed density. Disputes between “academic” and “modern” artists; discussions between figurative and abstractionists; trouble around Portinari, among other controversies, crossed the collectives, without necessarily undoing them; after all, were disagreements and differences that gave life to each of them. In this sense, referring to CAM meetings, Paulo Mendes indicates how the controversies animated the group: “The arguments boiled as the glasses emptied around the tables Sava and Pacha were serving. Often, parties were improvised, dances that came noisily at dawn” (p.81). Dissensions have taken (and boosted) the Modern Art Week itself, he says; viewed from the plastic arts point of view, the exhibition was marked by “heterogeneity, contradictions and inconsistencies” by modern positions that lived within the movement. The same can be said of its consequences. If some circles and characters (Flávio de Carvalho, for example) sought to nourish attitudes of rebellion, others, such as the Paulista Family of Art, moved away from the very designation “modernist” by the deliberate resumption of the artistic tradition. This finding does not lead the author to overlook the contributions of these groups to the task of thinking about the constitution of a modern artistic environment in São Paulo, which brings us, once again, to the critical balance of Paulo Mendes. In his words:

“[...] Paulista Artistic Family came to affirm a praiseworthy belief in the indispensability of the *métier*, the verification of the technical and formal elements of the art of painting, which meant a powerful stimulus for the formation of a professional conscience in young Brazilian artists, especially in São Paulo, and thus represented, and undoubtedly, an important step in the evolution of modern art in the country, understood in a widest sense” (113).

The serene tone and commitment to launch an expanded and nuanced view on modern art in São Paulo does not exempt the author of critical judgments (when, for example, he marks his distances from the readings of Mário de Andrade on the Santa Helena group), nor the defense of a central argument: the place of the Modern Art Museum as the culmination of a process of artistic germination, which began in 1922 and has consolidated over the years. In this sense, the book can be read as a prehistory of the museum, as the sketch of a retrospective painting, as its author says, which shows the conditions of possibility of the new institution (officially constituted in 1948 and whose headquarters date from 1949) and of the 1st Biennial (1951), tributary of an artistic environment that progressively welcomes modern art. So, the last five chapters of the book work as the starting point of the analysis, sending the reader back to the beginning.

When the subject is the MAM and the Biennial, there too, Paulo Mendes de Almeida exercises his descriptive talent, bringing forth the details that involved the ventures, looking for the leading figures as well as those secondary. In the final segments of the volume, the names of all the signatories of the public deed that constituted the museum are listed; the terms of its statute; the management team and the one in charge of the organization; public reactions to its creation; the first exhibitions and the list of attendances, national and foreign. Descriptions, all of them, mobilized to emphasize the pioneering character of the 1st Biennial and its organizers to whom “it was the opening of the bite in the middle of the forest”. The inaugural character of the project is highlighted by the signs of decline it already identifies in 1963, when the 7th Biennial was opened, which was then disassociated from the MAM and under the responsibility of the newly created Biennial Foundation.

There is no way to fully recover the content of the texts that make up this “*De Anita ao museu*”, its richness from the descriptive point of view or all the clues that it sends to future researchers. Therefore, we should only register the invitation to read (or re-read) the rich and tasty narrative of Paulo Mendes de Almeida that expands our knowledge and judgments about modern art in the country.

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