Pedrosa, the “Old Lion”—Franco-Brazilian Fragments of a History of Committed Criticism

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Opening session of the VIIIth Congress of the AICA, *Acte du Congrès de l'AICA*, Tel Aviv, July 1963 © AICA (From left to right) Jorge Romero Brest, Mário Pedrosa, Will Grohmann, James Johnson Sweeney, Abba Eban, Haim Gamzu, Mordechai Namir, Simone Gille-Delafon, Giulio Carlo Argan, Hans Ludwig Cohn Jaffé, Jacques Lassaigue, Robert Delevoy – Fonds AICA

- 1 Mário Pedrosa (1900-1981) is now recognized as one of the outstanding figures in the history of 20th century art criticism. As is also attested to by the sum of his writings recently published by the MoMA,¹ the Brazilian critic acted in such a way that his activities were not confined to the albeit very wide boundaries of his own continent. Quite to the contrary: through the turbulent ups and downs of his career, in which exile, at times forced, at others voluntary, became one of the leitmotifs, he managed to establish himself as a ‘global player’, ahead of the pack.

- 2 When you start putting together the archival pieces dealing with Mário Pedrosa’s professional and intellectual activity, it is tempting to regard them rather as nothing less than “exhibits”, but in the real sense of the word: “pieces of evidence”. To be sure, these documents help us to retrace so many micro-(hi)stories that forged international cultural exchanges after 1945. The fact is that their common historical challenge seems to be above all determined by the strength of conviction which is systematically at work in the critic’s writings. But what are we to understand here by committed, not to say militant criticism? In 1968, in a typology of critical stances, Michel Ragon refers, among others, to that of the “militant critic, fellow fighter of a clan, or even leader of the pack, who has eyes only for a single Chimène,² who is all the more dear to him because she is sometimes the product of his imagination.”³ So be it. This defence—at times blind—of a movement or a trend is translated into an impassioned and perforce partial criticism. But Ragon does not specify that it is indeed the political impact of this commitment which was already the third attribute, a corollary of the other two, of the famous Baudelairean maxim: “Criticism must be partial, passionate, political, that is to say it must adopt an exclusive point of view, provided always the one adopted opens up the widest horizons.”⁴

- 3 Pedrosa remained loyal to his Marxist ideals throughout his career, devoting his early works, resulting from the years he spent in Europe between the wars, to Käthe Kollwitz, a leading German figure of social art. If that expressionist sculptural oeuvre strikingly combined artistic commitment and political cause, it seemed to become an obvious springboard for the Brazilian’s intellectual career. This obviousness—which also contained the risk of ending up by promoting an art that was subordinate to politics—was nevertheless swiftly done away with in Mário Pedrosa’s case, in favour of artistic choices which, at that time, were diametrically opposed to the communist aesthetic diktat, starting with the radical abstraction of Brazilian concretism in the 1950s and 1960s. Put more clearly, the conviction underpinning his critic’s stance had to do with an art whose political power issued precisely from its distance from, not to say opposition to, the dominant forms of discourse and powers-that-be. So commitment went hand in glove with struggle. It goes without saying that this underlying belief in an art giving rise to counter-power—if only for its irrepressible creative freedom—was shared by many leftwing critics and intellectuals of his generation, before falling into a certain abeyance when faced with the rise of postmodern relativism⁵ in the 1980s. In 1963, Mário Pedrosa chaired a thematic session at the 8th AICA Congress (International Association of Art Critics) in the summer heat of Tel Aviv, and with these words, in the guise of a preamble, reminded attendees of the nature of their discussions: “We have agreed to examine the matter of artistic creation in modern technology without superficial division between conflicts and integration. Conflict is merely the path towards an integration, and as soon as an integration is achieved, well, we set out again towards a conflict, because there cannot be any permanent integration.”⁶ Is this the inner contradiction of the evolution of History? Shortly thereafter, Mário Pedrosa would find himself in the line of fire of the

political disputes of his day and age. Integration, on the other hand, had been successful, for him, from the word go, within the international network of art critics.

- 4 As one of the founder members of the AICA—which was created in Paris in 1949—Mário Pedrosa immediately got involved in the creation of the Brazilian national section, regularly presented papers at conferences and congresses, and became the association’s vice-chairman in 1957. It was also because of these events that he strengthened and enlarged his professional network, the first elements of which dated back to his lengthy stays in Europe and the United States during the 1930s and 1940s. The archives give us an overview of his areas of reflection and action, which were then expanding apace. His papers of the 1950s attested to a progressive vision, which was, all in all, quite typical of the period, and which understood art above all as a means of knowledge. In a paper given in 1953, about the links between art and the sciences (in which his works dealing with *Gestalt* theory still ring out), he celebrated abstraction, in particular, as a form of expression freed from socio-political fetters, when he said: “Art has freed itself from its age-old bondage [...] now presenting itself, for the very first time, as an end in itself, which is to say as an aesthetic phenomenon, and nothing more. It is not to be confused either with magic, or religion, or politics, or fashion, and it is to be judged by its own laws and requirements.”⁷
- 5 In asserting his role as a go-between, he was the brains behind a significant operation involving international cultural politics when he organized the AICA’s first Congress Extraordinary⁸ in Brazil in 1959. From 17 to 25 September, the sixty or so critics in attendance (two thirds of whom came from Europe and the Americas) discovered, thanks to Pedrosa, and by way of a preview, the country’s spanking new capital, Brasilia, which would be inaugurated a few months later, and crystallized international expectations of the day. The sum of the documents dealing with that event described—over and above the diversity of the various discussions and reactions—the optimistic political climate, incarnated by the leftwing government of President Juscelino Kubitschek de Oliveira, who was also at the Congress’s inaugural session. Borne along by the universal aims of modernism, seen as an effective answer to the emancipation of his country, Mário Pedrosa made the following emphatic point on that occasion: “The spirit blowing over Brasilia might well be an echo of the ancient mercantilist spirit of the colonizing king, but, in its deep-seated reality, even if not yet altogether explained, the driving force is the spirit of utopia, the spirit of the plan, in a word, the spirit of our day and age.”⁹ In São Paulo, the congress participants visited the fifth Biennial which, unsurprisingly, gave pride of place to abstraction.
- 6 Two years later, Pedrosa found himself at the head both of that same Biennial, and of São Paulo’s Museum of Modern Art, founded in 1947. With a powerful institutional platform thenceforth at his disposal, he stepped up his efforts to promote young Brazilian art all over the world, including the works of Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticia, while at the same time maintaining a dynamic dialogue with western developments. As is illustrated by a letter from Pierre Restany dated 26 August 1961, he was conducting an effective campaign—“despite one or two misunderstandings due to spelling”¹⁰—to encourage exchanges between Europe and South America. Regarding his organization of visits by several European critics to the sixth Biennial, Pierre Restany praised his “tremendous efficiency”¹¹ and, once back from his initiatory visit to Brazil, extolled the great quality of a “Biennial of maturity”.¹² The friendship between the two men began within the AICA, and grew ever closer during the 1960s.¹³

- 7 In 1964, however, following the military putsch in Brazil, the age of great utopias seemed a thing of the past. In 1969, after a new wave of especially brutal repression by the military regime, Mário Pedrosa, like so many of the country's other intellectuals and culturally involved people, became the target of a witch hunt which forced him to request asylum in Chile. It was once again the São Paulo Biennial which crystallized socio-political tensions, by acting as an instrument of national propaganda. Following the incarceration of Niomar Moniz Sodré Bittencourt, editor of the daily newspaper *Correio da Manhã* and president of Rio de Janeiro's Museum of Modern Art, a campaign of international support was organized by Pedrosa and Restany, stepping up petitions and individual testimony, and going hand in hand with the organization of a boycott of the Biennial. In a letter of 1st September 1969, the Brazilian critic briskly summed up the frightening situation: "We have tried everything, but the incoherence possessing our 'friends' of the 10th Biennial is total. There is nothing to be saved, everything is to be destroyed, but there are not many of us. [...] Your name, your head, our name, our head now have a price on them! I could certainly tell you a few things!!! Apart from the courage shown by Niomar and the *Correio da Manhã* (provided it lasts...), we are terribly alone! [...] Very dark days lie ahead of us. Political games involving the alliance of great intellectual mediocrity are now in their full glory."¹⁴
- 8 The fact remains, however, that the man whom Pierre Restany affectionately nicknamed "the old lion"¹⁵ was far from abandoning the fight. From his exile in Chile (where he was again hunted down after Augusto Pinochet's *coup d'état*), and subsequently from France, he still did battle, working in particular for the creation of a new museum in honour of Salvador Allende. In just the first two years of his campaign, he brought together more than 700 donations of artworks from all over the world, making the Museum of Solidarity in Santiago de Chile undoubtedly one of the most persuasive and tangible traces of committed criticism on an international level.

Program of the 6th Biennial of São Paulo, 10 Sept. – 31 Dec. 1961. Fonds Pierre Restany

NOTES

1. See Heloisa Espada's article “Mário Pedrosa and Geometrical Abstraction in Brazil. Towards a Non-dogmatic Constructivism” in *Critique d'art*, no. 47, autumn-winter 2016.
2. Translator's comment: Chimène is the famous feminine character in the play *Le Cid* by Corneille (1637).
3. Ragon, Michel. “Préface”, in Pierre Restany, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, Paris: Planète, 1968, p. 9-10
4. We are obviously referring to Charles Baudelaire's famous essay “A quoi bon la critique?”, 1846 Salon.
5. It was none other than Pedrosa, who was probably among the first to do so, who launched the term “postmodern” in 1966 in an article devoted to the works of Hélio Oiticica. Pedrosa, Mário. “Arte ambiental, arte pós-moderna, Hélio Oiticica”, *Correio da Manhã*, Rio de Janeiro, 26 June 1966.
6. AICA, published proceedings of the 8th Congrès International des Critiques d'Art, July 1963, Tel Aviv [PREST.A 1052], p. 45
7. Typed memorandum annotated by hand by Mário Pedrosa, “Thèse : Les rapports de la science et de l'art” (in French), p. 2-3, AICA International collection [FR ACA AICAI THE CON006 7/07]. Lien URL : http://www.archivesdelacritiquedart.org/uploads/isadg_complement/fichier/293/AICA53-Com-M_rio_Pedrosa.pdf
8. The congress discussions were organized around the theme “La cité nouvelle, la synthèse des arts”. See the dossier “Ier Congrès extraordinaire AICA. Brasília-São Paulo-Rio de Janeiro. 17-25 Septembre 1959”, AICA International collection [FR ACA AICAI THE CON013]. Lien URL : http://www.archivesdelacritiquedart.org/outils_documentaires/fonds_d_archives/show/830
9. Typed memorandum by Mário Pedrosa, “Brasília, la cité nouvelle” (in French), 1959, p. 4, AICA International collection [FR ACA AICAI THE CON013 2/01]. Lien URL : http://www.archivesdelacritiquedart.org/uploads/isadg_complement/fichier/474/AICA59CO-Com-M_rio_Pedrosa.pdf
10. Typed letter from Pierre Restany to Mário Pedrosa of 26 August 1961, Restany collection [PREST.XSAML 15/9]
11. *Ibid.*
12. Restany, Pierre. “VIe Biennale de São Paulo”, *Cimaise*, November-December 1961, no. 56, p. 74-81
13. See the dossiers about South America in the Pierre Restany collection. For a broader contextualization of their exchanges, see also the articles by Isabel Plante and Stéphane Huchet in: *Le Demi-Siècle de Pierre Restany*, Paris: INHA/Ed. des Cendres, 2009, p. 287-309 and p. 311-324. Edited by Richard Leeman
14. Handwritten letter from Mário Pedrosa to Pierre Restany of 1st September 1969, Pierre Restany collection [PREST TOP AML 018 3/3]
15. See in particular the typed letter from Pierre Restany to Niomar Moniz Sodré Bittencourt of 1st September 1970, Pierre Restany collection [PREST TOP AML 018 2/3]