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Mário Pedrosa and Geometrical Abstraction in Brazil: Towards a Non-dogmatic Constructivism

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- 1 On several occasions in his writings, the Brazilian critic Mário Pedrosa (1900-1981) commented the fact that usually he was considered as a radical defender of the called “concrete” and “constructive” art. This self-defence often seemed to be made in jest, as if the subject was somehow unworthy of attention or useless. “Many people think this critic has a reputation for being sectarian, partisan, political, that he would only tolerate one type of art, usually described as ‘non-figurative’, ‘abstract’ or ‘Concrete’, etc. However he never declared or ratified this publicly.”¹
- 2 The use of quotation marks for “Concrete”, “Concretist”, “Informel” or “Constructivist” are also recurrent in his writings, to underscore his distrust of labels and over-dogmatic positions in art. Though it was questionable, this reputation was not altogether without foundation. Pedrosa was not only one of the most influential defenders of abstract art in Brazil since the Second World War, he was also one of the main promoters of artists affiliated to geometric abstract art with Russian, Dutch, Bauhaus or Concrete roots. Lygia Clark, Almir Mavignier, Abraham Palatnik, Geraldo de Barros, Ivan Serpa, Hélio Oiticica, Ferreira Gullar, Lygia Pape among other protagonists of Concrete and neo-Concrete Brazilian art, chose Mário Pedrosa as their interlocutor and theoretical reference. His

reputation as the defender of the “Brazilian Constructivist project”² rests on the fact that since the 1940s, he campaigned in favour of an “autonomous” modern art, that could reform human-kind through the use of strangeness, by transforming its ways of seeing. Abstraction played a major part in this project thanks to its “universal” nature, as it was a kind of antidote against the political use of figurative art along the lines of social realism. Mário Pedrosa’s art criticism always expressed an anti-fascist position, as well as opposition to other salient episodes of 20th-century history. He also brandished the flag of Brazilian political and cultural autonomy on the international scene. Until the 1930s, his main occupation was political militancy. First as a member of the Brazilian Communist Party, which he joined in 1926, later as an organiser in the Brazilian Trotskyist movement and as one of the founders of the Fourth International. During the different periods he lived in Europe and the United States, as a student or a political exile, Pedrosa met various figures, like André Breton, Louis Aragon, Joan Miró, Giorgio Morandi, Clement Greenberg, Meyer Shapiro, Joaquín Torres García and Alexander Calder. This helped him create a network that would prove very useful in his future activities in the field of art — as a critic, an active member of AICA (International Association of Art Critics), a curator and an inventor of institutions.³

- 3 His arguments against the Informel art movement that appeared after the war and his defence of Brazilian modern architecture, that he conceived of as the country’s great contribution to 20th-century art, add to the representation of Mário Pedrosa as favouring “Concretism”. Otília Arantes, one of the greatest experts on Pedrosa’s work,⁴ highlights the fact that according to him, geometric art in 1950s Brazil was also a form of resistance and intellectual autonomy turned against the Informel wave. To quote Arantes’s interpretation, “our abstract art [...] represented – for Mário Pedrosa – local results that contradicted a mere international fashion [...]. Brasília seemed to crown this enterprise – the great synthesis that the avant-garde had heralded and that the abstract Constructivist project had reactivated and put into the hands of modern architecture.”⁵
- 4 Pedrosa’s conceptual approach of the imprecise terms of “abstract art” and “Constructivism,”⁶ along with Oscar Niemeyer and Lucio Costa’s projects for Brasília throw a shadow over the figure of this supporter of Concrete art. A more thorough analysis shows that the works of Concrete and neo-Concrete artists are far-removed from the purist sources of Brasília, since they share no similarities either in their methodology or their goals. At the time of its construction, Pedrosa did indeed support the idea that the new capital could accomplish the utopia of a synthesis of the arts, though this never happened, as he soon admitted.⁷ By the same token, given the historical circumstances and the formal characteristics, it does seem questionable to describe as “Constructivist” the modern architecture erected in Brazil with the support of Vargas’s regime, like the monumental capital built to become the main symbol of Juscelino Kubitschek’s “developmentalist” policies.
- 5 The Brazilian art scene of the 1950s was a battlefield among different trends, including the proponents of a nationalistic and militant modernism, the partisans of Tachism and other Informel aesthetics. Geometric abstraction then became just one of many currents. The diversity of national and international subjects discussed by Pedrosa, who displayed a keen interest in the new generation, shows him as entertaining many ambitions, anxious to explain historical processes and to recognise every artist’s particularities rather than rallying partisans to one current or another. For Pedrosa, the real revolution of modern art could have resulted from its powers on perception. According to him, the visual

productions of psychiatric patients, children and “primitive” people (what he called “virgin art”) could alter ways of seeing and acting in the world, just like abstract art could. For almost forty years, Pedrosa collaborated with the psychiatrist Nise da Silveira and the art studio of the Setor de Terapia Ocupacional do Centro Psiquiátrico Nacional (Occupational Therapy Department of the National Psychiatric Centre), in the Rio de Janeiro neighbourhood of Engenho de Dentro. Moreover, he publicly defended the works created by their patients.⁸ He also supported the art schools that were created for children at the end of the 1940s in Rio de Janeiro. All this fundamentally influenced his understanding of modern art. In 1949, Pedrosa defended a thesis, *Da Natureza Afetiva da Forma na Obra de Arte* [On the Affective Nature of Form in Artworks], on the universality of art and aesthetic perception, based on gestaltism.⁹ The works by Nise da Silveira’s patients often served as examples for his hypotheses.

- 6 The recent publication of works by Pedrosa in Brazil, the United States and France, along with analyses of his career, crucially contribute to the international circulation of his writing and to a deeper understanding of the complexity of the questions he raised.¹⁰ Adele Nelson’s essay, “Radical and Inclusive: Mário Pedrosa’s Modernism,”¹¹ tackles for the first time the central role played by the critic in organising the European delegations that took part in the second Biennale do Museu de Arte Moderna of São Paulo, in 1953 and 1954. The author stresses the crucial position Pedrosa gave Paul Klee in the narrative of modern art that he tried to consolidate on this occasion. The same goes for Alexander Calder, whom Pedrosa had defended since the 1940s as an exemplary artist, whose pleasingly unorthodox abstraction earned him very favourable comments.¹²
- 7 In this first period, the Biennial’s ambition was not only to bring Brazil closer to international art, but also to outline a history of art, as Brazilian museums were not able to. The Second São Paulo Biennial, which took place at the time of the celebrations for the city’s 400th anniversary and of the inauguration of the Parque do Ibirapuera, was the most ambitious in this respect. Adele Nelson’s article points out that in 1953, Pedrosa lived in Europe for nine months in order to coordinate the European contribution to the Biennial.¹³ The author demonstrates how Pedrosa constructed a discourse based on the legitimised narratives of modernism on a national and international scale, in order to assert his ideas on the birth of abstract art in Brazil: “He refused to cede the mantle of socially engaged art to realism and criticized historical and contemporary expressionist practices, arguing that figures like Alexander Calder and Paul Klee, rather than Pablo Picasso, provided models for the creation of socially transformative art. Pedrosa also articulated a broad, inclusive conception of modernism wherein expression and creativity are not the sole domain of artists, but part of a larger cultural and, to Pedrosa’s mind, spiritual inheritance shared by all.”¹⁴
- 8 Pedrosa’s efforts with the German commission to bring a significant Paul Klee exhibition to Brazil are particularly indicative.¹⁵ He chose an artist who was undeniably connected to the idea of the autonomy of art from a formal and theoretical viewpoint, and whose career intersected with modernist movements while retaining its independence. The exhibition showed around 65 critical works produced between 1918 and the end of the 1930s, from the Paul Klee Foundation and Felix Klee’s private collection, both based in Bern.¹⁶
- 9 Adele Nelson also mentions the article Pedrosa wrote about Klee at the beginning of 1953, a few months before he left for Europe.¹⁷ The essay pays tribute to the artist’s heterodox career and positions regarding the European artistic tradition, describing the artist as a

“new-born” starting afresh, echoing other writings by Pedrosa where he discusses the importance of the connections between avant-gardes and the visual production of non-Western people.¹⁸ On the one hand, this position reinforced his arguments in favor of the universality of art, on the other, it opened a path for the integration of the visual production of countries with no artistic tradition, like Brazil, into art history through popular or “primitive” arts.

- 10 This non-dogmatic position also affected his critiques of the São Paulo-based group of Concrete artists¹⁹ and the choice of Alfredo Volpi (1896-1988) as the “Brazilian master of his times,”²⁰ on the occasion of Volpi’s solo exhibition at the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro (MAM/RJ), in 1957. Volpi is a unique case in the history of modern Brazilian painting. He was born in Lucques, Italy, and at age 2 he moved with his family to the Italian immigrant neighbourhood of São Paulo, Cambuci. Because of his lower-class background, he left school as a teenager in order to work as a house painter. His indirect contact with the paintings of the Italian *macchiaoli*, the Impressionists and the post-Impressionists through friends, occasional exhibitions, books and journals brought him to modernist easel painting. This was the starting point for the self-taught, almost illiterate painter, who formed his rich visual culture throughout the 20th century from books, exhibitions and the different groups he joined. Also significant was Volpi’s acquaintance with the works in the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP) and the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, both created in the 1940s, along with the Biennials. At different points of his career, Volpi drew on identifiably heterogeneous sources that went from Cézanne, Matisse, Carrà, Massimo Campigli and Oswaldo Goeldi to the Italian Renaissance, Concrete art or popular culture.²¹ Volpi was definitely no naïve, but for a long time he was considered as such because of his early years as a house painter, his informal training as well as his work’s connections with popular culture. A myth of the “pure” modern Brazilian artist, free from any outside influence, was created around him and fuelled by Pedrosa himself.
- 11 In the 1957 exhibition at the MAM/RJ, Volpi displayed his diversified path, crowned by a late “Constructivist” phase, which explicitly dialogued with the geometric art which was prominent in the country.²² From the end of the 1940s, Volpi developed a strikingly original repertoire, a series of provincial house facades, structured by one-dimensional geometry. Volpi borrowed the stripped aesthetic and the radical simplification as well as the theme from popular painting. Lorenzo Mammì remarked that this type of synthesis also pervaded other forms of Brazilian art of that period, like Manuel Bandeira’s poetry and Dorival Caymmi’s music.²³ Pedrosa concluded his essay for the exhibition catalogue at the MAM/RJ by declaring that Volpi was the “master of his times.”²⁴ A few days later, he reasserted his diagnosis in his column in the *Jornal do Brasil*, answering the critic Antonio Bento, who considered that the painters Cândido Portinari, Lasar Segall, Di Cavalcanti and Alberto Guignard were “greater than Volpi”. According to Pedrosa, the synthesis Volpi created between modern geometric painting and the lyrical atmosphere of the facades of popular houses represented an “artistic event of the highest importance,” a modern and universal pictorial language, “Brazilian painting’s cry for independence²⁵ from international painting and the School of Paris.”
- 12 The singling out of Paul Klee in the international narrative and of Alfredo Volpi in Brazil, both regarded as first-rate modern artists, reveals Pedrosa’s taste for a non-dogmatic Constructivism. Despite their differences, both bodies of work are notable for their flexible geometric structures, the ambiguities between abstraction and figuration, their

celebration of childhood, their fine, visible brushstrokes, their freedom in choice of materials, and their vibrant and contrasted tones. Modern art's relationship to the "primitive" and to "non-academic" training is visible in both instances, albeit in different ways, in the formal specificities and the very style of the works. According to Pedrosa, these aspects guaranteed the "autonomy" and the singularity of a truly modern practice, that would be able to bring about the revolution through strictly visual and perceptive means.

NOTES

1. Pedrosa, Mário. "O ponto de vista do crítico" (*Jornal do Brasil*, 17 January 1957), in *Política das artes. Textos Escolhidos I*. São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 1995, p. 161-164. Ed. by Otília Arantes
2. The "Brazilian Constructivist project" was first theorised in 1976 by Ronaldo Brito in the inaugural part of his seminal essay on neo-Concrete art (Brito, Ronaldo. "Neoconcretismo", *Malasartes*, nº 3, April-June 1976, p. 9-13). The following year, Aracy Amaral and Lygia Pape curated the first large-scale exhibition on the theme at the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro and at the Pinacoteca do Estado, São Paulo: *Projeto construtivo brasileiro na arte, 1950-1962*. The full text by Ronaldo Brito was only published in 1985 (Brito, Ronaldo. *Neoconcretismo: vértice e ruptura do projeto construtivo brasileiro*. Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 1985).
3. On Mário Pedrosa's career, see: Arantes, Otília. *Mário Pedrosa: itinerário crítico*. São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2004.
4. Otília Arantes edited the collection of Mário Pedrosa's work published by the University of São Paulo: *Política das artes. Textos Escolhidos I*, 1995; *Forma e percepção estética. Textos Escolhidos II*, 1996; *Acadêmicos e modernos. Textos Escolhidos III*, 1998; *Modernidade cá e lá. Textos Escolhidos IV*, 2000. Aracy Amaral had previously published two collections of the writer's essays: Pedrosa, Mário. *Mundo, homem, arte em crise*, São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1975; Pedrosa, Mário. *Dos murais de Portinari aos espaços de Brasília*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1981.
5. Arantes, Otília. "Prefácio", in Pedrosa, Mário. *Política das artes. Textos Escolhidos I*, Op. cit., p. 31
6. In "Caracas: Escena Constructiva", Luis Pérez-Oramas questions the use of the term of "Constructivism" in relation to geometrical abstract experimentations in Latin America: "Up to what point can one say with certainty, regarding the work of Latino artists who produced abstract-geometric solutions in various times and places, that they were part of a truly "Constructivist" art scene? In 20th-century Latin America, up to what point is the use of the term "Constructivist" legitimate to describe the wider – and necessarily deformed – field implied by the uses and digressions of non-objective artistic languages?" [Pérez-Oramas, Luis. "Caracas: Escena Constructiva", in *The Geometry of Hope: Latin American Abstract Art from the Patricia Phelps Cisneros Collection*. New York: Blanton Museum of Art, Fundación Cisneros, 2007, p. 262. Ed. by Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro]
7. Pedrosa, Mário. "Entre a Semana e as Bienais", in Pedrosa, Mário. *Mundo, homem, arte em crise*, Op. cit., 2nd edition, 2007, p. 272. Ed. by Aracy Amaral
8. Pedrosa, Mário. "Mestres da arte virgem" (*O Estado de S. Paulo*, 21 December 1963), in Pedrosa, *Forma e percepção estética*, Op. cit., p. 85-94; *Museu de Imagens do Inconsciente*, Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Nacional de Arte, 1980, (Coleção Museus Brasileiros, 2). Ed. by Mário Pedrosa; *Marcas e*

memórias: Almir Mavignier e o ateliê de pintura de Engenho de Dentro, Campinas: Komedi, 2012. Ed. by Lucia Reily and José Otávio Pompeu Silva; *Raphael e Emydgio: dois modernos no Engenho de Dentro*. São Paulo: Instituto Moreira Salles, 2012. Ed. by Heloisa Espada and Rodrigo Naves

9. This thesis was defended on the occasion of a competitive examination for the position of Professor in Art History and Aesthetics at the Faculdade Nacional de Arquitetura, in Rio de Janeiro (Cf. *Forma e percepção estética. Textos Escolhidos II*, Op. cit., p. 105-176.) On this subject, see: Cabanas, Kaira M. "A Strategic Universalist", in *Mário Pedrosa: Primary Documents*, Op. cit., p. 23-35.

10. *Arte. Ensaios*, São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2015. Ed. by Lorenzo Mammì; *Arquitetura. Ensaios críticos*, São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2015. Ed. by Guilherme Wisnik; *Discours aux Tupiniquins*, Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2016. Ed. by Ana Gonçalves Magalhães and Thierry Dufrêne. Along with these publications, the project *Documents of 20th Century Latin American and Latino Art*, coordinated by Mari Carmen Ramirez at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, offers innumerable texts by Pedrosa on the website: <http://icaadocs.mfah.org/icaadocs/>. In 2017, the Museu Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia will open a large-scale exhibition based on the thought of Mário Pedrosa, curated by Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro and Michelle Sommer, which will open new horizons to discussions of his work.

11. Nelson, Adele. "Radical and Inclusive: Mário Pedrosa's Modernism", in *Mário Pedrosa: Primary Documents*, Op. cit., p. 35-43

12. Pedrosa, Mário. "Calder, Escultor de Cataventos" (*Correio da Manhã*, December 1944), in *Modernidade cá e lá. Textos Escolhidos IV*, Op. cit., p. 51-66; Pedrosa, Mário. "Tensão e coesão na obra de Calder" (*Correio da Manhã*, December 1944), in *Modernidade cá e lá. Textos Escolhidos IV*, Op. cit., p. 67-79; Pedrosa, Mário. "A máquina, Calder, Léger e outros" (*Política e Letras*, September 1948), in *Modernidade cá e lá. Textos Escolhidos IV*, Op. cit., p. 81-90

13. Nelson, Adele. "Radical and Inclusive: Mário Pedrosa's Modernism", art. cit., p. 39

14. *Ibid.*, p. 36

15. As early as the end of 1951, the Museu de Arte in São Paulo had organised the first exhibition devoted to Paul Klee in Brazil, showing works from the Kunstmuseum in Basel, Curt Valentin's private collection of works on paper and the Buchholz Gallery in New York.

16. See the exhibition catalogue of the Second São Paulo Biennial: *Paul Klee 1879-1940*, Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1953

17. Pedrosa, Mário. "Klee, o ponto de partida" (*Tribuna da Imprensa*, 31 January 1953), in *Modernidade cá e lá. Textos Escolhidos IV*, Op. cit., p. 193-196

18. Pedrosa, Mário. *Panorama da pintura moderna*, Rio de Janeiro: Ministério da Educação e da Saúde, Departamento de Imprensa Nacional, 1952

19. Pedrosa, Mário. "Paulistas e Cariocas" (*Jornal do Brasil*, 19 February 1957), in *Acadêmicos e modernos. Textos Escolhidos III*, Op. cit., p. 253-256; Pedrosa, Mário. "O paradoxo concretista" (*Jornal do Brasil*, 24 June 1959), in *Mundo, homem, arte em crise*, Op. cit., p. 25-27

20. Pedrosa, Mário. "O mestre brasileiro de sua época" (*Jornal do Brasil*, 18 June 1957), in *Acadêmicos e modernos. Textos Escolhidos III*, Op. cit., p. 271-276

21. On Alfredo Volpi, see: Salzstein, Sônia. *Volpi*. Rio de Janeiro: Campos Gerais; Sílvia Roesler, 2000; Mammì, Lorenzo. *Volpi*. São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 1999; Naves, Rodrigo. "Anonimato e singularidade em Volpi", in *A forma difícil: ensaios sobre arte brasileira*, São Paulo: Editora Ática, 2001

22. On Volpi's dialogue with Concrete and neo-Concrete artists, see: Naves, Rodrigo. "A complexidade de Volpi: notas sobre o diálogo do artista com concretistas e neoconcretistas", *Revista Novos Estudos - CEBRAP*, June 2008, p. 39-55.

23. Mammì, Lorenzo. *Volpi*, Op. cit., p. 28

24. Pedrosa, Mário. *Volpi 1924-1957*, Rio de Janeiro: Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro, 1957

25. This expression refers to the “Ipiranga Cry”, Brazil’s declaration of independence from Portugal, pronounced by the Prince-Regent Pedro near the river Ipiranga on 7 September 1822 (Editor’s note).